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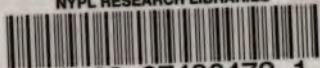
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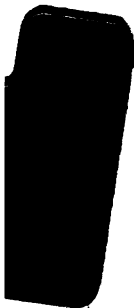
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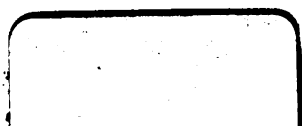


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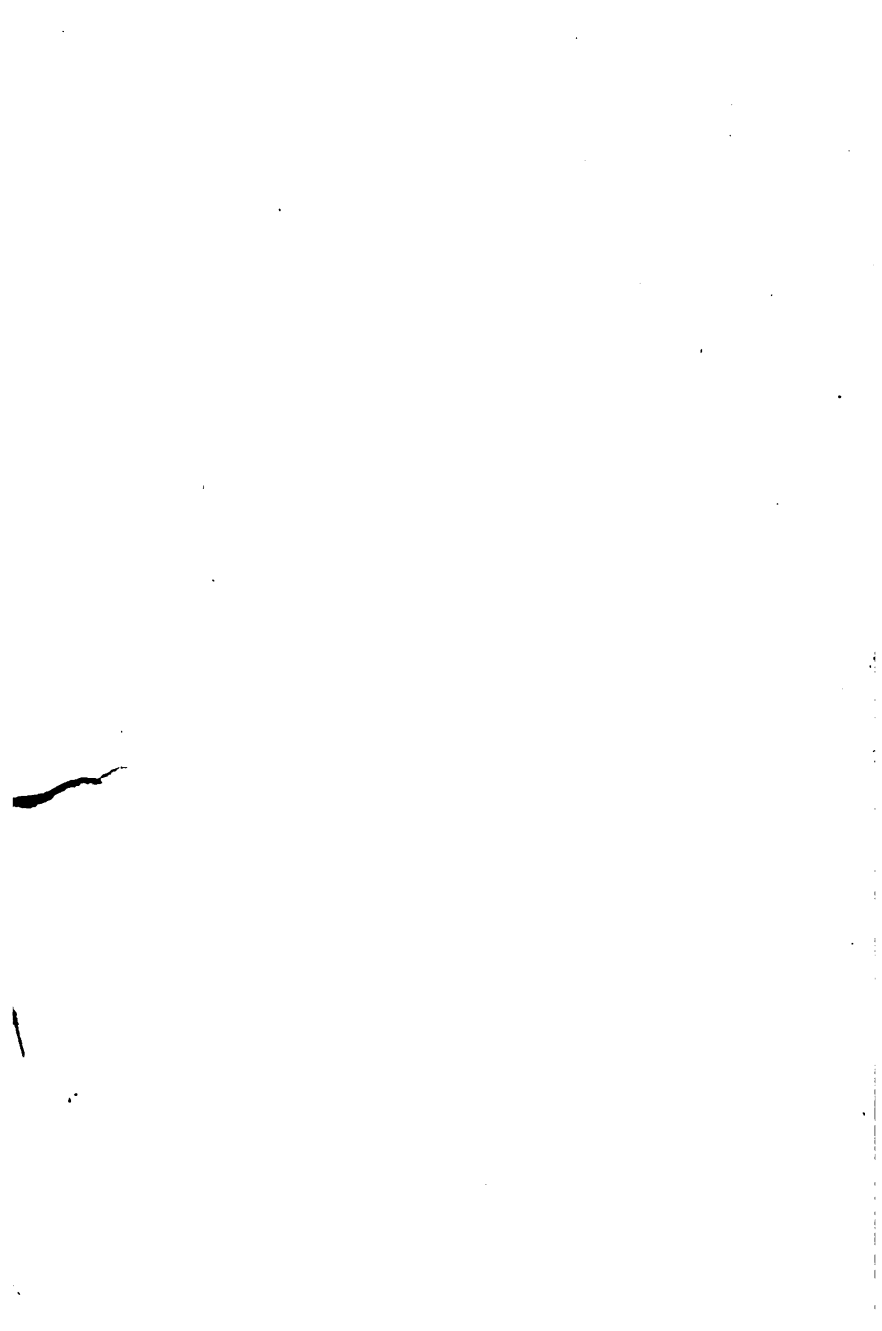


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**W. E. NORRIS**

AUTHOR OF

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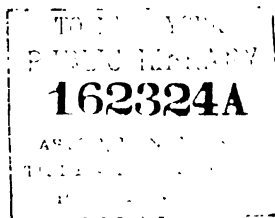


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# THE CREDIT OF THE COUNTY

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## CHAPTER I

### A WELCOME HOME

DENIS VALE, emerging, on a still, warm afternoon of early summer, from the wayside railway-station which was but a mile and a half distant from his abode, decided to walk home. As he had arrived a couple of hours before his time, no conveyance was waiting for him, and it really was not worth while to summon the village fly on account of his baggage, which could very well follow him later. Besides, he wanted to stretch his long legs and breathe the fresh country air, which he loved, after three days and nights of London, which he hated.

This stalwart, clear-eyed young man, who was just past his thirtieth birthday, but who scarcely looked his age, might have taken a first prize anywhere as a specimen of the class to which he belonged—the physically attractive, morally sound, mentally well-balanced, and practically illiterate class of English country gentlemen at the close of the nineteenth century. It is an expiring class, doomed by centralization, free-trade, and a recent chancellor of the exchequer to disappear ere long: what its successor will be like, those who live will see; but it will not, one

may venture to predict, perish unwept. Denis Vale, at any rate, being pretty well off and as yet unburdened with a large family, had hitherto discharged a squire's duties, as he understood them, to the entire satisfaction of the county. Whether he had been equally successful in the fulfilment of his conjugal obligations, is another question. Mrs. Vale might have had something to say—would, indeed, certainly have had something rather uncomplimentary to say—about that, had she been consulted. But what is the use of consulting people unless you mean to act upon their demands or suggestions? Denis, after all, had granted his wife three successive London seasons, at the price of no small personal weariness and discomfort: surely it was his turn to claim, for once, a reasonable, healthy, enjoyable summer! Moreover, he had had reasons for reasonably refusing, this year, Barbara's annual request. It is true that he had not specified them; but that was no fault of his. A nice row there would have been had he committed the imprudence of specifying them!

Yet they were cogent. He ruminated over them, while he strode across the hay-fields under the high June sun, and said to himself that they were cogent. Not that there was any harm in Barbara, who—within the limits inseparable from her modernity—was a good little wife and mother; only smart society was neither improving her nor increasing her happiness. That much had been evident to him in more ways than one, and had reminded him that prevention is better than cure—especially as incurable maladies are easily enough contracted. He himself had mixed a good deal in what is called smart society during his bachelor days, which may perhaps explain his distaste for the same as a married man. Intermittent twinges of com-

punction had, nevertheless, assailed him in the course of his own brief, obligatory visit to the metropolis; and that was why he was carrying with him in his pocket a diamond-and-emerald ring which had cost him a considerable sum of money. Barbara's passing fits of ill-temper were seldom, as he knew, proof against emeralds. He had remembered, too, to purchase presents for his offspring—an air-gun for Dicky, aged five (because you can't begin too early with boys if you want them to develop into decent shots), and a beautiful dolly, who opened and closed her eyes, for Di, aged three. Thus he had every ground for anticipating a warm welcome home.

The soft, sunny landscape greeted him, as it always did, with a tacit welcome. It was a landscape characteristic of central England, pleasing rather than beautiful, gently undulating, well timbered, suggestive of peace and perhaps of rather more agricultural prosperity than it actually enjoyed; although Trentshire, being a hunting county and a district of large landed proprietors, offered certain uncovenanted mercies to the stricken farmer. Over the western horizon brooded a heavy, dark cloud which showed the whereabouts of that famous manufacturing city, Blackhampton; at every other point of the compass the sky was clear, and of that pale turquoise blue which in these islands announces settled fine weather. The hay would be a good crop, and would be got in all right this time, Denis thought.

He had stepped across a stile and was walking along a short stretch of high-road, which adjoined his property, when the sound of rapidly approaching wheels caused him to glance over his shoulder. He recognised at once the high dog-cart, the thoroughbred bay, and the swarthy gentleman who owned both;

but his intimacy with the latter was scarcely sufficient to warrant the cheery familiarity with which he was hailed.

"Hullo, Vale! Back from the little village already, eh? Well, that's all right. You're the very man I wanted to see."

The speaker handed the reins to his groom and climbed down, saying, "Just trot quietly on to South-acre and wait for me at the lodge."

He added, as he shook hands with the pedestrian, "I'll accompany you for a bit, Vale, if you don't mind."

Denis minded a little; but not enough to make discourteous revelation of his sentiments. He did not particularly like this wealthy Semitic personage, who had for some seasons past been a hunting acquaintance of his and who had lately become his permanent neighbour; still there was really nothing against the man, except his vulgarity, which can hardly in these days be accounted a disqualifying attribute; so he answered quite civilly:

"Very glad of your company, I'm sure, Mr. Asher."

"I say," began Mr. Asher, in a confidential tone of voice, "this is a bad job about the hounds, isn't it?"

"Oh, I expect it will be all right," answered Denis cheerfully; "there's plenty of time yet, and they are sure to find somebody."

"Well, it seems that they can't find anybody, and after all, you know, we're within a couple of months almost of cub-hunting. Of course, if we are to have a subscription pack, with a sufficient guarantee, some sort of a master will be forthcoming; but that sort of thing would be a sad comedown for the North

Trent, wouldn't it? I suppose *you* couldn't be persuaded to take the hounds, Vale?"

"Oh, dear, no! To begin with, I'm more of a shooting than a hunting man. Besides which, I couldn't afford to hunt the country at my own expense, and I shouldn't care about being the paid servant of a fractious committee."

"Ah!—well, I can't blame you. Poor old Sir George used to take the subscriptions, it is true; but he often told me he would sooner be without them. Some fellows seem to think that, in return for their wretched ten guineas, or whatever it is, they have a right to grumble and dictate. The fact of the matter is, that unless a man has money enough to be independent of subscribers, he had much better leave the thing alone. And, now that Sir George is dead, I hardly know who in the county *has* money enough to take his place."

"Present company always excepted. Have you been appointed yet?"

"Not formally, I have had some hints about it. That is exactly why I was anxious to see you. As a friend, now, what would you advise me to do?"

It was upon the tip of Denis's tongue to reply that he could not venture to number himself amongst Mr. Asher's friends, but he subdued that not unnatural temptation. It would certainly be a sad pity if the North Trent hounds were to fall from their hitherto high estate, and this pushing Hebrew, if no very experienced sportsman, was at least keen and in the habit of riding straight. Moreover, he would put under him a first-rate, cross-grained huntsman after would stand no nonsense, and—he was possessed gave the wherewithal to uphold time-honoured traditions. In all probability his decision had already been rude-



unquestionably, he had little opposition to fear. In spite, therefore, of certain old-fashioned ideas and personal prejudices, Denis Vale's advice was unhesitating.

"Oh, if you ask me, I should say take them, by all means. You would like it, I suppose."

"Well," answered the other meditatively, "I should and I shouldn't. Of course, if I do decide to accept the mastership, the thing will be done well. There will be no falling off from Sir George's time, and perhaps there may in some ways be a slight improvement."

Mr. Vale was positively sure of that.

"Yes; and it will cost me a good lump of money—a good many thousands a year, in fact."

"I daresay it will."

"So that one is justified, perhaps, in expecting some equivalent."

Denis stared for a moment and then laughed. "What sort of an equivalent, I wonder?" he asked.

"Well," replied Mr. Asher, "you see, I am more or less of a newcomer in these parts; I should wish, before making up my mind, to feel sure of my neighbours' support."

"You may count upon mine," Denis declared. "I can generally manage two days' hunting a week after the turn of the year, and although, as you know, my coverts are not extensive, it shall not be my fault if they are ever drawn blank."

That was not what Mr. Asher meant, and Denis afterwards was aware that it was not; yet, for various reasons, almost unable to say more. He could not even give the response which seemed to be expected of him by his companion, becoming more explicit of intention, complained of the singularly distant

and stand-off attitude adopted by the Trentshire families.

"Upon my life," Mr. Asher exclaimed, "I believe this is the most stuck-up county in England! You might live ten years in these parts and contribute to every blessed club and institution there is—and Lord knows there are plenty of 'em!—before people began to realize that you were one of themselves."

Denis thought that it might possibly take them even longer to realize what was so obviously not the case; but he only answered: "We are not so much stuck-up as stick-in-the-mud; it comes of being born and bred on stiff clay. Things don't dawn upon us rapidly—which is unfortunate in a social, but fortunate in a political sense. At least I, as an inveterate Tory, am bound to think so."

"Oh, if it comes to that, I'm as Tory as anybody," Mr. Asher declared. He added, after a minute: "Personally, I don't care a button; I have friends enough of my own, and I daresay some of them think themselves a cut above the Trentshire magnates, if that matters. Only, when one is asked to take the hounds, one does feel that some sort of local backing-up is required."

"I haven't the least doubt that you will be backed up in the hunting-field," was Denis's blandly unsatisfactory reply.

Denis Vail was of a somewhat obstinate disposition. He would perhaps have asked his wife to call on Mrs. Asher, had the right way of persuading him to do so been adopted; but this pertinacious Jew adopted quite the wrong way of sticking to him even after he had passed through the wicker gate which gave access to his own grounds. The man was not to be shaken off by anything short of downright rude-

ness; yet it was absolutely certain that he would not be invited to come in to tea. Denis would have stood still in the garden and continued the conversation for half an hour rather than yield to pressure of that description.

As a matter of fact, he did stand still on arriving at the end of one of those long, level alleys, carpeted with the closest sward and bordered by hedges of clipped yew, for which the Southacre gardens are so justly renowned. His quick ear had caught the sound of voices; he knew the spot to which Barbara's tea-table had most likely been carried out that sultry evening, and he said to himself, "No, you don't, my good fellow!"

It may be that Mr. Asher had become aware of Mrs. Vale's vicinity; at any rate, he displayed the utmost reluctance to take an unspoken hint. He lingered and loitered, while he dwelt upon the sacrifices which every M. F. H. must be prepared to make; every now and again he advanced a few paces, compelling his interlocutor to do otherwise. Not until every device for protracting the one-sided discussion had been exhausted did he accept defeat.

"Well, I am afraid I have bored you, Vale," he said; "but I wanted to have your opinion. I'll think it over. Upon the whole, though, I expect my wisest plan will be to let things slide; it was only in the interests of sport that I ever hesitated."

Denis wished the poor man good-evening and walked on—not without a twinge of compunction. It would have been easy enough to gratify him, and perhaps, in the interests of sport, it would have been polite to do so. Nor would Barbara have been in the least likely to object. She would have given Mr. Asher a cup of tea and would have become quite

familiar with him in five minutes. To be sure, she would not have called upon Mrs. Asher, so that he would have gained nothing by the introduction; but it would have taken him some little time to find that out. It had taken Barbara's husband some little time to find out that, although she was always willing to make fresh male acquaintances, she did not care to be bothered with strangers of her own sex. Some male acquaintance was even now (so the pitch of an alternative voice revealed) engaged in conversation with her, and Denis wondered, with a slight smile, whom she had got hold of. The neighbourhood of Southacre, in the month of June, was but scantily furnished with young men.

Nine men out of ten, were they permitted to select the manner of their death, would choose to be shot through the heart, rather than perish by slow degrees; and in the same way, if some irremediable catastrophe is to ruin our lives, most of us would prefer it to fall upon us without weeks or months of anxious foreboding. Nevertheless, sudden catastrophes make a tremendous demand upon the nervous system. Denis Vale was a magnificent type of the healthy, well-to-do, athletic Englishman, and if he had any nerves about him, he had never been made disagreeably conscious of their existence; yet he had not advanced many yards from the spot where he had left Mr. Asher standing when his heart, after one great bound, ceased beating, while a curious moist chill, as from some icy blast, overspread his whole person.

What he was looking down upon from the advantage of a slight eminence would have furnished one of our innumerable, but not strikingly original, modern artists with a charming little subject for an

Academy picture. The sheltered grass-plot, barred by long, dark shadows from the yew-hedges which fenced it in; the moss-grown sundial in the foreground; the glittering tea-table; the graceful, girlish figure, arrayed all in white, whose waist was encircled by the arm of a comely young loon, whose golden head dropped upon his shoulder and whose pocket-handkerchief was pressed to her lips—the whole thing, judiciously and sympathetically treated, required only to be labelled “Adieu, love!” or something equally touching, in order to secure a ready purchaser and a subsequent satisfactory sale in engraved form. The beauty and pathos of it were, however, a little spoilt for one who was thus admitted, as it were, to a first private view by the circumstance that the lady in white was not a girl, but a married woman. As for Ernest Glyn, it might be conceded that he was good-looking in a somewhat effeminate style; but no man, when seen in the act of embracing another man’s wife, can possibly look good. Not, at all events, to the other man. Denis’s impulse—a most natural and human one—was to descend swiftly upon the miscreant and so arrange his features that no female eye would care to behold them again for many a day to come.

He did not yield to it: it was not, in truth, characteristic of him to yield to impulse under any circumstances, nor, being what he was, could he fail to recognise in a moment that the situation was not one to be dealt with precipitately. He drew no nearer to the unsuspecting pair, not caring to confirm the evidence of his eyes by that of his ears, but turned and slowly retraced his steps, with a bent head. Thus he walked almost into the arms of Mr. Asher, who confusedly apologized.



"Beg your pardon, I'm sure, Vale; I thought you would excuse my following you. The fact is I quite forgot to ask whether Lord Mount-Sorrel had said anything to you about the possibility of my taking the hounds."

Denis, whose nerves were always under control, looked his olive-complexioned interrogator straight in the face. Did the man suspect anything?—had he seen anything? Apparently not; for he stood scrutiny without more embarrassment than was to be accounted for by his having pursued an inhospitable landowner upon an obviously insufficient pretext.

"You see," he resumed explanatively, "it is rather important to me to ascertain what Lord Mount-Sorrel's views are."

"I can't conceive why," returned Denis. "Considering that Mount-Sorrel has never been seen upon the back of a horse and that he doesn't know a hound from a terrier, I should have thought he was quite the last man in the county whose views upon such a subject could be of importance to anybody."

"Ah, but, my dear fellow, you forget that, fox-hunting apart, he is the first man in the county—the lord-lieutenant of the county. That makes him deuced important. Besides which, he owns nearly all the best coverts."

"I think I may venture to promise that there will always be foxes in those coverts. Of course Mount-Sorrel isn't a sportsman and doesn't pretend to be; but he is quite alive to his duties. No, he hasn't said a word to me about the mastership; I doubt whether he has even realized that it is vacant."

"Well, supposing he should speak to you, perhaps you wouldn't mind mentioning that his approval would go a long way with me."

"I will make a point of mentioning it. Is there anything else that I can do for you, Mr. Asher?"

There was probably nothing more that he could be invited to do with any prospect of success, and Mr. Asher, after some expressions of gratitude, once more took his leave—definitely, it might be hoped, this time.

As soon as he was out of sight, Denis drew a long breath of relief, muttering, "By George, that was a narrow shave! But he didn't see them; he wouldn't have been able to conceal his emotions if he had. One step more and we should all have been at his mercy! I seem to see myself taking Mrs. Asher in to dinner and imploring every stiff-backed old woman in the vicinity to be kind to her. Oh, my worthy Hebrew friend, you little know what a chance you have lost!"

He laughed aloud, wondering vaguely at himself for being capable of laughter. But of what strange, incongruous manifestations and vagaries is not our mortal nature capable! Who (unless, perchance, it be here and there a priest) can fathom the mysteries of the human heart or reconcile the actual with the antecedently incredible? Barbara, of all women in the world! Oh, if it came to that, she was flighty, avid of admiration, prone to flirting, though a matron of six years' standing: it was even in a great measure because she had chosen to make herself somewhat conspicuous with this very fellow Glyn—this silly young fellow who was about to take up a diplomatic appointment in South America—that she had forfeited her London season. But that she was what she had now proved herself beyond all possibility of doubt to be—no, one must witness such things in order to believe in them.

Presently Denis sat down on the grass beneath a spreading cedar, with his elbows on his knees, and reviewed the position in which events had placed him. He was quite cool by this time, clear in head and very bitter at heart. For his wife he made no excuses at all; he had judged and condemned her (incidentally judging and condemning her entire sex with her) upon evidence which could not be explained away, and, had she been childless, he would have known well enough how to act. But the children had to be considered. For the children's sake it might be—he almost thought it would be—necessary to save appearances, to let that young whelp leave the country scot-free and to take the risk of further highly probable humiliations. Further humiliations must, in that case, be anticipated, since it stands to reason that a woman who will embrace one illicit admirer will, opportunity aiding her, show the same favour to half a dozen others: the whole and sole question was whether a man is or is not bound to eat dirt in order to avert all the miseries attendant upon a public scandal. Denis, after a quarter of an hour of cogitation, concluded that, although no man is bound to make such a sacrifice, he would have to make it. He laughed again when he reflected that he must have meant to make it from the first moment: otherwise the unexpected reappearance of Mr. Asher would not have so greatly perturbed him.

"It is a charming lookout," he muttered, "and one's little personal dignity and self-respect seem likely to suffer; but at any rate there will be no scandal. Barbara—whom I must frighten—will continue, I am sure, to discharge her religious duties, visit the poor intermittently, cultivate such susceptible youths as may cross her path, and hear the children say their prayers



morning and evening. Most likely, after the first pangs of remorse at having been found out have passed away, she will begin to regard herself in the light of an injured innocent. But in what sort of light I shall eventually manage to regard myself, I'll be hanged if I know. At the present moment I feel rather more like a contemptible accomplice than anything else."

## CHAPTER II

### DENIS PRONOUNCES JUDGMENT

WHEN Barbara Mackworth—then a girl of eighteen and childish for her age—married Denis Vale she was thought to have done uncommonly well for herself. Vale, being a comparatively rich man, with a charming old place, conspicuous personal advantages, a large London acquaintance, and a reputation for fastidiousness, had always been expected to end by contracting some high alliance; so that Trentshire was a good deal surprised to hear of his choice having fallen upon Lady Mount-Sorrel's orphaned granddaughter, who, though pretty enough, was, after all, a mere nonentity, barely out of the school-room. Precisely in that fact, perhaps, lay her attraction for one who had been made familiar with the fashionable society of the period, its habits and its morals. Anyhow, he fell in love with her, and she with him—which, as Lady Mount-Sorrel contentedly remarked, was in every way satisfactory and creditable to them both.

The love-match did not turn out badly: indeed it turned out, to all appearance, exceedingly well. Yet to marry a person whose character is as yet quite unformed is, of course, to incur obvious risks, and the formation of Barbara's character necessarily took place under circumstances which her husband would

not have chosen had it been possible for him to choose. It was not possible for him, nor would it have been reasonable of him, to bury her at Southacre all the year round; she had a right, which he acknowledged, to see something of the world, like other young married women of her class. So there were months in London, superlatively enjoyable to her, utterly wearisome to him; also there were occasional flying visits to Scotland, to Newmarket, to Cowes, to the Riviera—the customary pleasure-seeking round, broken only by enforced intervals of quietude when Dicky and Di made their respective *débuts*. Denis really behaved very well to his wife. He “took her about,” he did not grumble, he paid her bills (which were sometimes unexpectedly heavy) without much remonstrance, he showed civility and hospitality to her friends, little though he liked the majority of them, and he soon desisted from any attempt to force his own country-loving tastes upon her. Only, as time went on and Mrs. Vale developed into the singularly pretty, fascinating, lively, and well-dressed young woman whom all Trentshire felt to be a credit to the county, the pair became gradually, hopelessly estranged. Their estrangement was the more hopeless because they never quarrelled—although this omission, it must be said, was not Barbara’s fault. She would, like the rest of her sex, have enjoyed an occasional quarrel and have been all the better and happier for one; but Denis, unfortunately, disliked nothing in the world quite so much as rows. Consequently, there were neither disputes nor reconciliations, and Mrs. Vale was fain to seek other outlets for the natural effervescence of her temperament.

She had, at the time when this narrative opens—or rather a little before that—convinced herself that

her husband did not care in the least for her. He was not unkind (save every now and then, when he saw fit to assert his authority, as in the instance of this prohibited London season, and declined to listen to argument); but he was evidently, almost ostentatiously, indifferent. Thus it came to pass that other persons, who professed themselves quite passionately the reverse, were not rebuked by her as they ought to have been. It is so pleasant and consoling to be respectfully adored! And her adorers had, upon the whole, been quite respectful; it was clear that they did not believe there was any harm in her. At odd moments she was half annoyed with them for being so certain of that, although she would have been still more annoyed had they dared to hold a different opinion. For, in truth, there was not much harm in her, nor anything the matter with her, beyond restlessness, vanity, want of work, and an insatiable longing to be appreciated.

Yet, in the evil hour, she allowed Ernest Glyn to kiss her, and even allowed him to assume that, if the Fates had been more propitious, she might have returned his ardent affection. A chain of unfortunate circumstances must be held partially responsible for this act of folly on her part. To begin with, she was out of all patience with Denis, who had sentenced her to spend the month of June in the country without assigning any possible reason for such selfishness; then she strongly suspected that his reason was a most insulting and unjustifiable one; thirdly, she had a genuine affection for this poor boy, who was so devoted to her, and whom the exigencies of his peaceful calling were about to banish to a remote, insalubrious land; finally, his visit took her by surprise and chanced to coincide with an access of profound mental

depression. She might, to be sure, have expected him to turn up, considering that his people lived only a few miles away and that he was not likely to leave England without bidding them farewell; but she associated him with London, where all their previous meetings and philanderings had taken place, so that his unforeseen advent and his impetuous avowal proved a little too much for her.

Sympathetic readers of Barbara Vale's history—if such there be—will be glad to hear that she was properly ashamed of herself as soon as she had dismissed her too audacious victim. She was aware of having behaved badly, and not more exultant over the memory of her bad behaviour than most mortals, after having permitted themselves to kick over the traces just for once. Had she been a member of the Church of Rome, she would doubtless have confessed her sin to her director and meekly accepted such penance as he might have pronounced requisite for the wiping out of the same. Nevertheless, she did not take an exaggeratedly serious view of what had occurred. Ernest, at his South America legation, would soon forget her; she, for her part, anticipated no particular difficulty about forgetting him; his discretion, since he was a gentleman, might be relied upon, and (most consolatory reflection of all) nobody would ever know that she had in this single instance been betrayed into transgressing the limits of strict decorum. She was, in short, penitent, but scarcely to the extent of being remorseful—most assuredly not to the extent of contemplating any avowal to her injured husband, who, she said to herself with a sigh and a yawn, would presently be making his appearance and giving vent to irritating ejaculations of contentment, as his habit was whenever he returned

to the out-of-the-world home which was so dear to him.

However, he did not appear, although the distant sound of wheels on the gravel testified at length to the fact that he had arrived. He did not, it seemed, so much as take the trouble to inquire whether Mrs. Vale was in the house or in the garden, nor had he made any attempt to ascertain her whereabouts by the time that the clangorous dressing-bell rang. That, Barbara murmured, was so like him! Preoccupied with other subjects, she was in no wise alarmed by the reflection of how singularly unlike him it really was; and this fresh proof of studied neglect, so far as she thought about it at all, rather gratified her than otherwise. Who could deny that Denis deserved much worse treatment at her hands than he had received?

Conformably to custom, the children invaded her room while she was dressing for dinner, tumbling over one another in their eagerness to exhibit the gifts which they had just received from their thoughtful father. "How like him!" she exclaimed once more, on being shown Dicky's air-gun. "Our lives won't be worth a day's purchase unless I confiscate the ammunition."

But Dicky, when the meaning of the words "confiscation" and "ammunition" had been explained to him, set up so doleful a howl that she hastened to withdraw her threat; for she was a fond, indulgent mother, besides having at that moment a slight headache, the result of exacerbated nerves. If loss of life ensued, Denis must defend himself as best he might against a charge of constructive murder, she remarked, shrugging her shoulders; she only begged her maid and the nurse to bear witness that she had protested.

Then she duly admired the doll, and, at Di's request, bestowed upon it the name of Susan Amelia, the nurse (to whom it appeared that this was a graceful compliment) kindly consenting to stand sponsor on the occasion. Barbara herself was still in many respects a child, and in none more so than in her ability to cast off care at a moment's notice.

She had, indeed, almost dismissed Ernest Glyn from her mind by the time that she descended (ten minutes after dinner had been announced) to the library, where her husband was engaged in writing letters. She stepped up behind him, placed her fingers lightly upon his shoulders, and imprinted the faintest semblance of a kiss upon the top of his head. They had not yet given up kissing one another when they met, although the ceremony of late had been of a purely perfunctory character and had sometimes been omitted. It was omitted, this time, by Denis, who laid down his pen, looked round, and remarked blandly:

"What a pretty frock!"

His wife made a grimace and threw up her hands. "Who but you would have the face to say such a thing as that about a disgraceful old rag which you have seen at least fifty times already! But I suppose you mean to be polite. Anyhow, it doesn't matter what one wears when one is so far removed from the ken of civilization."

"Not a bit," Denis cheerfully agreed. "Civilization, by the way, sends you its love and its compliments, and will be delighted—at least, some of it will—to come and stay with you as soon as it has nothing better to do."

"Ah," sighed Barbara, "one knows what that means!—a few destitute old frumps and bores in July

and August, and perhaps half a dozen elderly shooting men in September. All things considered, I am not sure that I don't prefer unbroken solitude."

"I am not sure," observed her husband dryly, "that I myself don't prefer it—what shall we say?—to certain intrusions. But be comforted: you will have my exhilarating company for some time to come, and I flatter myself that I am rather a good hand at resisting intruders."

They entered the long dining-room, in the middle of which a small round table had been laid for two, and conversed upon such topics as were fit for the ears of attendant domestics. These were not too numerous; but the most was made of them that could be made, and dinner at Southacre was never a protracted ceremony. By the time that the children had come down to dessert Denis was enabled to introduce a fresh subject by remarking:

"I walked back from the station with Asher. He is going to take the hounds."

"Going to take the hounds!" exclaimed Barbara, languidly interested; "that objectionable Jew going to take the hounds! Do you mean to say that he will be allowed?"

"He is likely, as far as I can make out, to be entreated. He isn't, after all, so very objectionable, and he can afford to do the thing well, which is more than any of the rest of us could. He won't be objected to; but I gather from what he said that he may possibly object. That is, unless his conditions are complied with."

"The idea of his being so impertinent as to make conditions! What are they? Not that he is to be huntsman as well as master, I should hope?"

"Oh, no, he isn't quite such a fool as that. But



he gave me to understand that he was foolish enough to insist upon some sort of social recognition. He is prepared, in short, to spend a good deal of money; only he expects to be called upon and asked to dinner."

"Ah! that's his wife."

"No doubt. Such is his demand, though; and he can't help having a wife, poor beggar! I daresay he would if he could. He accompanied me on foot from the station, and even made a determined effort to force his way into your presence, for the express purpose of demonstrating to me that his wife's claims would have to be acknowledged. I am inclined to think myself that they will. Nevertheless, I held him at bay—for his own sake, as well as for yours. I was pretty sure that any attempts to get you to call on Mrs. Asher would be bound to result in disappointment."

Mrs. Vale laughed. "You really *are* rather a good hand at repelling intruders, Denis; I wish I had your power of being politely rude. No; of course I am not going to be the first to call upon the woman, little as I care about these provincial distinctions. Why didn't you tell him to apply to Granny? Nobody else counts in our benighted parts."

"He is aware of that, I imagine; he made a particular point of his wish to be supported by Mount-Sorrel. So he said, at least; but I presume that by 'Lord Mount-Sorrel' he meant 'Lady Mount-Sorrel.'"

Barbara laughed again. "At that rate the hounds will go masterless. Granny will see him and his wife at Jerusalem before she will take any notice of them, I suspect. Still he might try—fortified by your aid."

Denis made no rejoinder. It had been necessary

to talk about something; but he was not, for the time being, much interested in Mr. Asher or the North Trent Hounds, and he now devoted his attention to the children until their nurse came to lead them, vainly protesting, off to bed. As soon as they were gone he lighted a cigarette deliberately, as his habit was, and drew his chair nearer to his wife's. Then, without the slightest visible emotion, he began:

"I have often cautioned you against imprudence; but I should not have thought that even you would be so crazy as to fling yourself into the arms of one of your lovers in the broad light of day and in a place which is commanded from several points of the compass. Asher might easily have seen you; it is almost a miracle that he didn't. That I did see you is already an awkward enough circumstance, you will admit."

Her white face and scared eyes answered for her. The circumstance was so much more than awkward that nothing in extenuation of it could be urged. She was fain to gasp out feebly: "How dare you spy upon me and insult me! How dare you accuse me of having more than one lover!"

"My audacity," returned Denis, with a faintly contemptuous smile, "goes the length of assuming that one usually implies others. Perhaps, however, one is sufficient for all practical purposes. Now the question is—or rather was, because I have made up my mind about it—what arrangements are to be made for the future? I might try for a divorce——"

"You would never get one. I am absolutely innocent. Ernest himself will tell you how innocent I am—and there is not, there can't be, an atom of evidence against me."

"Quite so. Would you mind not interrupting

again until I have finished? I might, as I was saying, try for a divorce; but, as you say, my chances of obtaining one would be small. I might thrash Mr. Glyn, delight and scandalize the neighbourhood, show you the door, and leave you to sue for restitution of conjugal rights if you dared. Or, again, I might, without making too much fuss about it, force you to agree to an amicable separation. There are several other possible solutions of the difficulty; but I am sure you will be glad to hear that I have decided to adopt none of them. Why, for instance, should I blow my brains out? I enjoy life; I am a strong, healthy man, and I may, bar accidents, live for another thirty or even forty years. Added to which, I have a son and a daughter whom I should be sorry to leave to your exclusive care. As for revenge—well, to speak quite frankly, you don't seem to me to be worth all the inconvenience that vengeance would entail."

"Ah!" cried Barbara, who had burst into tears, "that is just it! You don't care—you never have cared—a bit for me. If you did, you would understand, perhaps, that it isn't easy to help being grateful to those who do care. Of course it was wrong of me to let that poor boy behave as he did; but——"

"Pray don't apologize; we are not discussing by-gones—which, indeed, can't be profitably discussed; we are only contemplating the actual situation and what is to be the upshot of it. I suppose that, for the children's sake, we should continue to live together, to all outward appearance as if nothing had happened to interfere with our domestic harmony. Naturally, I don't suggest anything so absurd as a reconciliation; by my way of thinking, these are things which no man in his senses ever forgives, or ought to forgive. But I offer, on the ground I have named,

to let you retain the position which you have fairly forfeited. Does that proposal meet your views?"

It was impossible to be more disdainful or more insulting; yet—what reply could she make? Placed as she was, the sole alternative to accepting her husband's terms was to cast herself upon the protection of Ernest Glyn, who doubtless adored her, but who was scarcely in a position to elope with her. Besides, she did not at all want to elope with him. Therefore, after a moment of silence, she said briefly and rather sullenly, "Very well."

"I should add," resumed Denis in the same cool, unconcerned accents as before, "that although I am anxious to interfere with you as little as possible henceforth, I do not intend you to disgrace me, or even yourself. Glyn, I believe, will soon be sailing for Chili or Peru, or some such place——"

"He is to leave immediately."

"So much the better. You will not see him again, please, before his departure: it is a simple measure of precaution. And with regard to any future intimacies of yours, I must reserve the right of cutting them short if they should seem to me to be approaching a compromising stage. Subject to that proviso, you will be at liberty to follow your own inclinations."

Barbara rose slowly and prepared to leave the room. "I suppose," said she, "there would be no use in my attempting to explain or excuse what you saw this afternoon."

"Not the slightest," answered her husband, while he lighted a second cigarette.

"You wouldn't believe a word I said?"

"I might or I might not; but nothing that you could say would alter either the facts or my opinion of them and you."

Her eyes flashed angrily as she dashed the tears away from them with the back of her hand. "I hate you!" she exclaimed.

"That, at any rate, is a statement which I can well believe. But you realize, nevertheless, how desirable it is that we should keep up a show of amicable relations—which was all I wanted you to realize. I shall not refer to the subject again, unless you force me to do so."

He held the door open for her, and she passed through it without looking at him. It was the end of a chapter in their lives—a chapter, as they both felt, which could never be reopened.

## CHAPTER III

### MR. ASHER'S WIFE

IF Trentshire considered Mr. Reuben Asher a cad—as it did—Trentshire was perhaps not very far wrong. He could, at any rate, hardly be called a gentleman; and to say that a man is not a gentleman is supposed in these days to be tantamount to bestowing some opprobrious designation or other upon him. He had, however, sundry good qualities and laudable instincts, notwithstanding the facts that he was of Jewish origin and that his father had amassed a large fortune by methods which might not have borne too close scrutiny; the proof of which is that, as he drove homewards, after having been politely snubbed by Denis Vale in the manner described, he resolved to keep his own counsel respecting a certain scene involuntarily witnessed by him in the Southacre garden. For he had seen all that Denis had seen, and a lady who chose to ignore his wife was to all intents and purposes at his mercy. His motives for forming the above generous decision may, to be sure, have been of a mixed character; he himself admitted that they were when he mused:

“I sha’n’t breathe a word to Isabella: she would only play the deuce all round and make more enemies than friends for us if I did. It’s none of my business; and if Vale doesn’t mind eating dirt, I’m sure I don’t

care how much he is made to swallow. Good fellow, too, for all his high and mightiness, and as plucky as they're made. He was ready to go for me at the slightest hint just now; I could see that. I wonder what he'll do to that rascally little wife of his. Nothing, most likely; it isn't customary to do anything in that class of society when awkward discoveries are made. A pretty lot they are, these smart people, whom Isabella worships! I could tell her a good deal more about them than she suspects, though she thinks herself so much more knowing than I am. Not that I should disgust her with them—oh, Lord, no! She means getting into Trentshire society by hook or by crook, and she'll succeed without any help from me; so I needn't give Mrs. Vale away. Women are all alike, confound 'em!—all bent upon getting something that they haven't got, and won't care about when they do get it. Some may be a bit more unscrupulous than others; but I wouldn't take my oath even of that. It's a mere question of temptation and opportunity, I expect."

These desultory reflections and the fast trotting of the bay mare brought Mr. Asher to the confines of his own estate, whereon he had erected a brand-new and most imposing mansion. Beaulieu, as it was called (Mrs. Asher imagined that by pronouncing the name "Bewley" and encouraging quick-growing creepers to overspread the outer walls she could bestow upon her abode and its denizens a certain false air of antiquity which would ere long find acceptance), had replaced a far humbler edifice, formerly known as The Red House, and tenanted as a hunting-box by Mr. Asher in his bachelor days. The structure was far too large for the appertaining property, and Mr. Asher sometimes sighed when he thought what

a very poor chance he would have of recovering a quarter of his outlay, should he ever wish to dispose of it; still, it had thus far answered his wife's purpose, which was to attract a sufficiency of two or three days' visitors from London and impress the neighbourhood with outward and visible signs of her smartness. She had in truth practically conquered London society, and knew any number of highly distinguished persons. Whether she would be equally successful in her assaults upon Trentshire society remained to be seen; hitherto she had met with a dogged, passive resistance which augured ill for her. However, she had captured the Bishop of Blackhampton, who counted for something, and Mrs. Rowe, who had a certain influence, and George Hallett, who was all-powerful so far as hunting men went. It was upon the hunting men that she chiefly counted, feeling sure that they would be ashamed to accept all she meant them to accept at Reuben's hands without compelling their wives to call.

Consequently, it was with outspoken vexation that she heard of her husband's failure to extort any definite promise from Denis Vale. He entered her dressing-room, while she was getting ready for dinner, to tell her how badly he had sped, and she did not allow the presence of her maid to deter her from calling him a useless idiot. Mr. Asher, more prudent, ordered the woman out of the room and remonstrated.

"Hang it all, Isabella! you don't want to have your schemes discussed and laughed at in the servants' hall, do you?"

"They won't be laughed at if they come off," returned Mrs. Asher coolly. "As for their being discussed, that's unavoidable; servants know and dis-



cuss everything. The groom who drove back with you from Southacre is just as well aware as I am that you wanted to be asked into the house, and that you weren't asked. Well, you had better refuse the hounds, that's all; otherwise you will find yourself left out in the cold after having concluded a one-sided bargain."

"I'm going to refuse," Mr. Asher somewhat moodily answered; "the game isn't worth the candle, and I never thought it was."

"Depends upon the candle," observed his wife, peering at herself in the glass and adding a few deft touches to an artistically prepared complexion. "I should have thought the game was worth a little trouble to you, considering what a lot of money you have spent upon it already. Personally, I would just as soon chuck the whole thing and migrate to some other part of England."

The worst of it was that she meant what she said; or rather, the worst of it was that she was capable of taking action in the sense alluded to—which would be horribly expensive and inconvenient.

She was a big, black-browed, handsome woman of determined character, and in every previous conjugal dispute she had come off victorious, although Reuben Asher passed for a coarse, obstinate sort of fellow amongst men. He was a little proud of her, as she stood there, resplendent in her white brocade and flashing diamonds—a little proud and perhaps more than a little afraid. Yet it was to her marriage that she owed everything, save her comely person; for she had been neither wealthy nor well-born—a converted Jewess, whom he had espoused for no better reason than that she had taken his fancy and that he, or his money, had taken hers.

"Take it all round, I don't know any other county in England which gives better certainties of sport than this," he said; "one can get as much hunting as one wants in these parts without being a master of hounds, after all."

"Ah, yes: that's your point of view; mine is that one can't get visiting-cards or invitations upon any other terms. Not even by going in for ritualism to please the Glyns or subscribing to half a dozen diocesan funds to conciliate the bishop. Therefore, my dear Reuben, I must beg you not to be sulky with Mr. Hallett, who is coming to dinner this evening, and who is bringing formal proposals with him, I expect."

"Oh, Hallett's dining here, is he? Yes, he is the mouthpiece of the committee, and he will probably have something to say. But I thought you advised me just now to hang back."

"Most certainly I advise you to hang back; but I don't advise you to burn your ships or to make a rude reply. These good people must understand that nothing is to be had for nothing; that's all. It isn't a great deal that we ask of them; but unless we get what we ask for, they may look elsewhere for somebody to hunt their county at his own expense. You may say as much to Mr. Hallett in politely veiled language."

The task of drawing a polite veil over conditions which must needs be rendered more or less explicit was neither particularly easy nor particularly pleasant, and Mr. Asher would much have preferred requesting the Hunt Committee to go and be hanged; but he had fallen into the habit of doing what his wife told him to do. He thought her a clever woman—which she was not—and he knew her to be a remarkably

resolute one: it was, upon the whole, conducive to peace and comfort to let her have her head.

Respecting her selection and entertainment of guests he was very willing to give her her head, feeling sure that she was more competent than he to deal with such matters; so that whether he was at Beaulieu or at his London house (between which luxurious places of residence Mrs. Asher fluctuated at that time of the year) he was pretty sure to sit his meals in company which was not always congenial to him. He was enough of a snob to derive considerable pleasure from the society of titled persons, but far too shrewd to make payment for the privilege in the form of pecuniary loans. Some of Mrs. Asher's friends had tried him by that test, and had been both hurt and surprised to find him obdurate. However, to use their own phrase, he "did them very well," and his hospitality often came in handy. Just now it had come in handy for the Blackhampton Summer Meeting, which some twenty ladies and gentlemen of prepossessing exterior had attended that day, in equipages provided for them by their host, who did not himself care much about racing. He, like Denis Vale, had been up in London, and when, simultaneously with the announcement of dinner, he entered the long saloon in which the house party had assembled, not a few of those who honoured him by their presence failed to recognise him. As an exception, a broad-shouldered, clean-shaven man, with clear blue eyes, stepped forward and shook him by the hand, saying:

"How are you, Asher?—and how is the brown horse? Going sound again, I hope."

"Well, I should rather like you to take a look at him when you can spare time," Mr. Asher answered.

"Harrison wants to fire him, but I'm no great believer

in firing. I'd sooner have your opinion than a vet's, anyhow."

Most Trentshire men would have agreed that George Hallett's opinion in such cases was worth that of any qualified veterinary practitioner. He was an active, capable person, farming his own land, briskly interested in all local matters, always ready to work with might and main on behalf of the Conservative member and to speak sensibly at the political meetings which have become indispensable nowadays; a good sportsman, too, and an excellent judge of horses, hounds, sheep, and cattle. At the age of six-and-thirty he remained a bachelor—possibly because his means were moderate, but more probably because he viewed women in general from a somewhat disdainful standpoint, holding that they were not worth the incessant bother which they are wont to occasion to those about them. With his own sex he was extremely popular, as, upon the whole, he well deserved to be; for he was absolutely straightforward in all his dealings, while his willingness to oblige a neighbour could always be counted upon. For Reuben Asher he had the sort of liking which he conceived to be due to a bold rider; if he had any instinctive prejudices against the Jewish race or any objection to *parvenus*, his common sense forbade him to let sentiments of that kind affect his conduct. "Asher is all right," he had told the Hunt Committee. "What you want is a master who is keen about the job and who won't mind laying out money upon it; you don't want an Admirable Crichton—and if you did, you wouldn't get one."

It had therefore become a mere question of what Mr. Asher might want, and to this George Hallett's present business was to obtain some definite reply.

After dinner he approached his host, whose isolation nobody else at the long table seemed anxious to disturb, and came straight to the point, as his habit was. He was authorized by the Committee, he said, to offer the mastership to Mr. Asher, provided that terms acceptable to the latter could be arranged. Adequate subscriptions to meet expenses could not, he was afraid, be guaranteed; but he, for his part, was prepared to give all he could afford, and he believed he might promise that some forty or fifty others would respond in the same spirit to any appeal addressed to them.

"My dear fellow," returned Asher, with a superb wave of the hand, "nothing on earth would induce me to be master of a subscription pack. If I were to take the hounds, I shouldn't ask for a penny, except contributions to the damage fund, which I don't think ought to be paid out of my pocket. But, to tell you the truth, I doubt whether I should be wise to accept the offer of the Committee on any terms. I'm not exactly a *persona grata* hereabouts, you see."

"Oh, rubbish!"

"No, it isn't rubbish; it's a fact that Lady Helen Glyn and Mrs. Rowe are the only two ladies in the neighbourhood who have troubled themselves to call upon my wife. I'm simply stating a fact, mind you; I'm not complaining of it. We have plenty of friends of our own, as you can see for yourself."

Hallett, glancing down the flower-laden board, above which a blue cloud of cigarette smoke hovered, contemplated the gentlemen described by Mr. Asher as his friends, and felt a little sorry for the poor rich man whom they so blandly ignored. He considered, however, that fox-hunting and social success were two different things, and he intimated as much.

Mr. Asher shook his head. "Ah, I daresay you think so; you aren't a married man. In my bachelor days, as you know, I didn't care twopence about any confounded old women, or young ones either; it was all the same to me whether they bowed or looked the other way when I met them. But times are changed now. I tell you, Hallett, I'm not going to be such an ass as to spend five or six thousand a year on keeping up the hounds and then have other men's wives turning up their noses at my wife. And what's more, Isabella isn't going to submit to it."

George Hallett, who had an intermittent sense of humour, began to laugh, but checked himself as soon as he perceived the deepening scowl on the other's brow.

"Oh, well," said he soothingly, "we must see what can be done. You have made a pretty good start, anyhow, with the Glyns and Mrs. Rowe."

"Lady Helen called because she couldn't very well help it after Isabella had presented their church with a pair of whacking big brass candelabra at my expense; but she hasn't asked me to cross her threshold, and I don't believe she will. Mrs. Rowe, I take it, doesn't count for much."

"She counts for what she is—a thorough lady from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet, and as genuine a sportswoman as there is in England," returned George with some warmth. "Besides being just about ten thousand times more intelligent than all the rest of them put together."

"Yes, yes; I have no doubt she is all that. But she isn't a big-wig; she can't make the others follow her lead; she isn't, in short—Lady Mount-Sorrel, for instance."

"Oh, there's only one Lady Mount-Sorrel," Mr.

Hallett admitted, smiling. He resumed presently: "Well, you'll think it over, Asher, won't you? Perhaps I had better report to the Committee that you are thinking it over, eh? I suppose you don't want me to tell them exactly what you have said to me."

Mr. Asher, nipping a blunt forefinger between his teeth, which were large and white, reflected. "I want you," he replied at length, "to tell them that I'll have no subscriptions, except to the damage fund; I want you to tell them that, if I decide to do the thing, I shall do it well; and I should like you to say that I'm willing to give a lot in the shape of money and trouble for the sake of keeping up old traditions. But they are not to take it into their heads that they are paying me a compliment by asking me to come to their assistance, and they are not to expect an immediate answer—that is, unless they would prefer 'No' for an answer. It isn't as if I had only my own inclinations to consult."

Hallett nodded. He gathered that he had a fair prospect of succeeding in his mission (and it was really rather important that he should succeed); but he realized that, in order to do so, he must conciliate Mrs. Asher, with whom he had nothing in common and whom he would fain have avoided. However, he said to himself that it was all in the night's work.

The night's work at Beaulieu invariably took the form of play, and usually took that of very high play: the lady of the house knew what was looked for by the distinguished visitors whom it was her privilege to entertain. But on this evening she did not join the party, which presently sat down to a game called "Ascot," a variation of roulette, in which the names of horses replaced numbers, and backers staked their money, at carefully calculated odds, on favourites or

outsiders or the field. She chose, instead, to retire into the adjoining conservatory with Mr. Hallett, who hated gambling, and who had frankly announced that he was anxious for a talk with her.

"It's about the hounds, of course," she began, as soon as she had made herself comfortable in a rocking-chair; "I haven't the vanity to imagine that my *beaux yeux* exercise any sort of attraction upon you. Well, I am afraid I must disappoint you, Mr. Hallett; I have been advising my husband to have nothing to do with your hounds."

"Then I venture to think that you make a great mistake, Mrs. Asher. There is nothing that a man in his position wants so badly as an occupation, and I believe that this occupation would suit him down to the ground. He has the means, he has the leisure, he has——"

"He has all the qualifications, or pretty nearly all, that *you* insist upon," interrupted Mrs. Asher, laughing, "and perhaps a few of those that are required for his own comfort as a master of hounds; that's understood. But where, if you please, do *I* come in? You want me to back you up, I presume. Why in the world should I?"

"Well, if it comes to that, why in the world shouldn't you?"

Mrs. Asher rocked herself languidly, while the *beaux yeux* which this stupid fox-hunter had not even pretended to admire surveyed him over the top of her fan. "For the reasons which Reuben has been giving you," she made calm reply.

"Ah, yes, exactly; he did mention them, and I can understand their seeming important to a lady, although, if I were in your place, I shouldn't think very much of them. If I were in your place, I should



just have patience and wait. You know Lady Glyn and Mrs. Rowe; depend upon it the others will follow suit, provided that you don't flatter their vanity by letting them know how eager you are to make acquaintance with them."

"But it so happens, Mr. Hallett, that I am neither patient nor eager. The Trentshire people are nothing to me; I can easily persuade my husband to hunt next winter in Leicestershire, where I should have the Duchess of Milford and many other friends to keep me company. Only I don't intend him to bind himself down here upon the off chance of my being honoured with bare civility. Lady Helen Glyn is quite useless. Even if she wished to lend me a hand—which she doesn't—she would have neither the time nor the energy to spare. All she thinks about, when she isn't nursing her imaginary ailments in bed or attending religious functions, is how to marry her son Ernest to Mrs. Rowe."

"The devil she does!" exclaimed Hallett, aghast. And then, "I beg your pardon, but surely you can't mean that. Ernest Glyn and Angela Rowe!—why, he's only a boy!"

Mrs. Asher laughed: she had a strident, unpleasant laugh. "Perhaps your friend Mrs. Rowe wouldn't thank you for that speech. How old do you suppose she is? But I daresay you know, and you needn't be agitated; for the thing isn't coming off. All the same, Lady Helen has hopes, and Mrs. Rowe has a nice little income. But this is a digression. I was saying that Lady Helen is no good to me, and I was going to say that there is one person, and only one, who would be of any good. Get Lady Mount-Sorrel to call here, and I will get my husband to do as you wish; otherwise I shall advise him to leave

you and your hounds severely alone. I know you like to be met in a frank, straightforward spirit; so—there you are!”

George Hallett, being himself far too frank and straightforward to promise more than he might be able to perform, could only reply dubiously: “I’ll do my best, Mrs. Asher; but I’m afraid I can’t answer for Lady Mount-Sorrel. Her own son, I’m sure, wouldn’t venture to answer for her. Do you make her patronage a *sine quâ non*?”

“I am not asking for her patronage—thanks; but I do make her recognition a *sine quâ non*, and so, you may take my word for it, will Reuben. This, of course, is between ourselves; I have spoken plainly to you because I didn’t think it fair to let you waste your time. Now you know what our conditions are, and if you can’t or won’t comply with them, I assure you we shall not break our hearts.”

“I have your husband’s permission,” observed George, “to tell the Committee that he is considering their suggestion.”

“And you have mine to tell them that he will go on considering it so long as they like to leave it open. He won’t accept it, though, until the county makes up its mind to accept your very humble servant. Shall we go and see how those gamblers are getting on now?”

## CHAPTER IV

### MRS. ROWE AND THE BISHOP OF BLACKHAMPTON

"ERNEST, dear," said Lady Helen Glyn plaintively, "I wish you wouldn't mind leaving poor Punch alone. Harrison, who came to see him the other day, says his heart is undoubtedly weak, and it can't be good for him or for any dog to leap into the air like that."

The young man in flannels, who had been summoned to his mother's boudoir from the lawn-tennis ground where he had been disporting himself, and who, by offers of tea-cake, was persuading a fat pug to jump over his racket, obediently desisted. He remarked:

"Punch is of too full a habit to be healthy; his heart would be all right if he had more exercise and less nourishment; but I suppose you didn't send for me to discuss the condition of his heart. Why did you send for me?"

"I wanted to caution you," Lady Helen answered, "against alluding to incense this evening before the bishop. We are not going to give it up, and he knows we are not, and he will look the other way as long as he is allowed; but the subject is best avoided for the present."

"It shall be avoided by me," her son willingly promised; "not for the world would I proclaim my

liking for the smell of incense at the risk of incensing a dignitary of the Church."

The truth was that he was relieved to have no more embarrassing admonitions addressed to him than that he should abstain from worrying the Bishop of Blackhampton and accelerating the pulsation of Punch's heart. He had been half afraid that his mother was going to say something about the state of his own heart; for if Lady Helen did not know that he was over head and ears in love with Mrs. Vale, a good many other people did. Neither Mrs. Vale nor he had been as prudent as they ought to have been: he fully realized that, and he was rather sorry for it. But although Lady Helen, whose ill-health prevented her from going much into the world or hearing current gossip, was free from the suspicions that he dreaded, she was nevertheless eager to direct his affections into what she conceived to be a desirable channel, and it was not of incense that she had been thinking when she had caused him to be called indoors that summer afternoon. She revealed her real object by observing:

"Angela Rowe is coming to dinner."

"Charmed to see her!" Ernest declared, with a yawn.

"I wish I could think that you would be—or even that you would look as if you were! She really is charming; everybody finds her so, and, without being exactly pretty, she is quite distinctly nice-looking. Besides, she must have a good five thousand a year, probably more, of her own to dispose of as she likes. Do consider it, Ernest. You could hardly hope to do better, and you might do so very much worse."

The young man, conscious of having actually done

very much worse (for his was no foolishly impulsive temperament, nor was the main chance ever far distant from his purview), could but shrug his shoulders.

"My dear mother!—considering that I am upon the point of starting for the other side of the world!"

"Oh, yes, I know," sighed Lady Helen; "I didn't mean that there was time for anything definite to be arranged now. Only you will be coming back again in a year or eighteen months, one hopes, and it would be easy, if you chose to take the trouble, to guard against being supplanted during your absence."

"You think that would be easy?"

"I am sure of it," Lady Helen cried.

She was sure of it. She was always apt to feel sure that her reasonable wishes were easy of accomplishment, provided that others would only be so good as to exert themselves a little towards that end. Moreover, she could not doubt that this handsome, fair-haired, six-foot son of hers had it well within his power to win the affections of any woman, spinster or widow. Being a younger son (and a somewhat expensive younger son into the bargain), it was greatly to be desired that some better provision should be made for him than the wretchedly-paid diplomatic service could ever offer, and Angela Rowe must be looked upon as a genuine prize in the matrimonial market. It would really be nothing short of criminal to disregard such a chance, Lady Helen thought. The chance had not been disregarded; Lady Helen had done her best in the very limited space of time granted to her; but of course a match cannot be brought about within a week and by means of a couple of interviews, which was all that Ernest's sense of filial duty had placed at the disposal of his parents. What, however, seemed feasible was, as she had in-

timated, to achieve a preliminary success. Therefore Mrs. Rowe had been invited to dine at Glyn Place and meet the Bishop of Blackhampton.

Brayton Lodge, Mrs. Rowe's pleasant place of abode, was situated in the near neighbourhood; but her intimacy with her near neighbours was an affair of months only. Although a Trentshire woman by birth and married to a Trentshire man, she had almost from her wedding-day resided elsewhere, the invalid husband whom it had taken all her time and care to nurse having been driven by incurable restlessness and constant pain from one distant land to another until merciful death had ended his wanderings. He had had a patient, indefatigable, devoted wife; it was perhaps hardly in the nature of things that he should leave behind him a disconsolate widow; for the unfortunate man's sufferings had rendered him exacting and querulous. Angela had married him, as was generally supposed, out of sheer pity: she could not have been in love with him; nor had he, at the time of their marriage, money and lands, which he had bequeathed unconditionally to one whom he described in his will as "the only disinterested human being I have ever known." Thus Angela Rowe, while still young, found herself blessed with what most people account the three best things that life has to bestow—health, wealth, and independence. Beauty she had not; for her features were homely and her hair and eyes of an indeterminate brownish hue; but a low-pitched voice and a kindly, honest, sympathetic smile were no very bad substitutes for what had been denied to her. Lord Mount-Sorrel, whose abrupt flashes of perspicacity sometimes surprised his friends and himself, said of her once that she was the sort of woman who always made you regret that she was not your

mother. Possibly his lordship may have had occasional reasons for regretting that a very different sort of woman occupied that position in his own family.

So Mrs. Rowe, who took up her permanent residence at Brayton Lodge when she had been some eighteen months a widow, soon became one of the most popular inhabitants of her native county. Many of those who dwelt round about her had been acquainted with her from childhood; others speedily grew familiar with her, for she was a very easy person to know; and—naturally enough—tentative suitors began to lay siege to affections which were sufficiently general and generous to be in small danger of capture by any individual. It was a matter of common knowledge—or, at any rate, of common report—that George Hallett, her late husband's sole intimate friend, had remained a bachelor for her sake; but she was not at all likely, it was thought, to take George Hallett as her late husband's successor, great though her liking and esteem for him were. If she had ever contemplated such a step as that, Lady Helen reasonably argued, she would have married the man—why should she not have done so?—in the first instance. Consequently, Mr. Hallett might with safety be asked to meet her at dinner and escort her into the dining-room: both of which things he did on the evening when the hard-worked Bishop of Blackhampton was a twenty-four-hours' guest at Glyn Place.

Now, nobody knew better than George Hallett himself that the lady of Brayton Lodge was not for him. If he hoped that she was not for anybody, and that she was entirely satisfied with the existing conditions of her life, he had the best authority for harbouring such hopes; although it may, of course, be contended that what appears to be the best authority in

cases of that nature is really the least to be relied upon. Of Ernest Glyn, at all events, it seemed quite absurd to be jealous; yet no sooner had the buzz of conversation round the dinner-table facilitated private intercourse than George took occasion to ask his neighbour:

"What do you think of that fellow?"

"Of young Mr. Glyn?" she returned, following the direction of his glance. "To tell you the truth, I haven't thought about him at all. Is it," she inquired presently, "possible to think much about him?"

"I can answer for its being possible to think him a conceited young ass," George rather gruffly replied.

Mrs. Rowe looked round. "Poor youth! What has he done?"

"You may well ask. I'm sure *I* don't know what he does. Plays lawn-tennis, I believe, if you call that doing anything; but he neither shoots nor hunts, and I doubt whether he even reads more than he is obliged."

"And yet he is conceited. Well, it doesn't very much signify to us what he is or what he does, seeing that South America will deprive us of him in a day or two. Talking of hunting, how does your hunt for a master get on?"

"Not too well. I've drawn Beaulieu, and I am afraid I must report that I've drawn it blank. That is, Asher declines at present to say either Yes or No. He sticks out for the oddest conditions. As far as money is concerned, there won't be the smallest difficulty, it seems; but he insists, and his wife insists, upon being called upon and asked to dinner."

"That, after all, isn't so very odd, is it? Oh, I think I can arrange that for them."



Mrs. Rowe, herself an ardent and experienced follower of the chase, dreaded as much as George Hallett did the prospect of seeing the North Trent Hunt degenerate into a mere subscription pack, under the control of a subsidized, imported master. Also, she conceived that she was making no vain boast when she spoke of insuring compliance with the Ashers' demands. "If that is all, they shall be called upon and dined," she declared reassuringly.

"But, unfortunately, they stipulate for Lady Mount-Sorrel."

"Dear me! this is serious. Lady Mount-Sorrel, of all people!"

"Yes, it's rather a large order; but it's the least they'll take. Why on earth anybody should care to make such a fuss about being noticed by an old woman who never goes to London and scarcely entertains at all in the country, I can't for the life of me imagine; but—there it is."

"It isn't herself; it is what she symbolizes," observed Mrs. Rowe meditatively. "I must try what I can do; but I don't feel particularly sanguine. Possibly the bishop might be able to help us."

Her words, owing to one of those abrupt silences which occur periodically at every dinner-table, reached the ear of the dignitary alluded to, who was seated on Lady Helen's left, and who gladly seized that opportunity to break off a discussion upon the practices of the primitive Church with which her ladyship had been embarrassing him.

"The bishop," said he, "is much more in need of help than competent to give it. Still, he will cheerfully do his best on behalf of those who have done their best for him, as Mrs. Rowe has. What is required of me now?"

"I'll tell you afterwards," answered Mrs. Rowe, laughing; "it's too delicate a matter to be spoken of before a mixed congregation."

The bishop smilingly inclined his head. He was a spare, clean-shaven man, rather young to be a bishop, unmarried, and of good family. It may be that he owed his preferment in some degree to the latter qualification; but more probably he had been appointed because he had a high reputation for tact and energy, because the diocese was not an easy one to administer, and because he was distantly related to Lady Mount-Sorrel. He had, since his elevation to the episcopal bench, steered his way through various awkward channels with no small skill, managing generally to evade contentious questions and to avoid committing himself, even when cornered. No doubt it was because Lady Helen had been inhospitably endeavouring to corner him that he persevered with a colloquy thus apparently closed.

"You," he remarked, "are entitled to a respectful hearing, for you have contributed handsomely to the Additional Curate's Fund and to the even more important object of providing decent dwellings for my poor factory people in Blackhampton; but I don't get on as quickly as I could wish. Present company excepted, I have had a lean week; my only catch has been Denis Vale, who, to do him justice, paid up like a man, though he grumbled."

"Vale," observed Mr. Glyn, "is liberal. Considering that he is not rich and that he has an extravagant wife, I call him liberal."

Mr. Glyn was a pompous personage, with a bald head, a salient nose, and no chin. Unlike a former sovereign of these islands, he had never been known to do a foolish thing or to say a wise one. He could

not, however, be expected to know that he was saying anything specially foolish in praising Mr. Vale or depreciating Mr. Vale's wife: it was reserved for his son to make the party aware of that.

"Mrs. Vale," Ernest saw fit to declare indignantly, "isn't allowed a chance of being extravagant. That selfish brute has no more consideration for her than if she were his slave. Just imagine keeping her mewed up at Southacre all through the spring and summer simply because he won't be at the bother and expense of taking a London house!"

"I can imagine greater cruelty than that," dryly remarked George Hallett, who was an old friend of Denis Vale's and who had no particular affection for Barbara. "Anyhow, it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good, and perhaps if Mrs. Vale had been more expensively housed this year, the poor of Blackhampton would have been worse."

"I have always thought," chimed in a lady who may have thirsted for fuller information, "that Mr. Vale was such a very devoted husband."

That idiotic young man rose to the fly instantly. "He a devoted husband! You can't know much about him. All I can tell you—and I am pretty well acquainted with them both—is that if she hadn't the temper and the patience of an angel, she would have left him long ago."

Some of Ernest Glyn's hearers looked down at their plates and smiled demurely; others were obviously eager that he should continue his imprudent remarks; the bishop, who never encouraged gossip, yet heard a good deal of it in one way and another, made haste to change the subject.

Later in the evening he took occasion to ask Mrs. Rowe whether she was upon intimate terms with

her neighbours at Southacre or not, and on learning that, although she had known Denis all her life, she had seen next to nothing of him since her marriage and his, he begged her to make a point of rectifying that omission.

"You may be of use to the estranged couple," he said, "and I know it is doing you a favour to suggest to you any way of serving your fellow-creatures."

"But are they an estranged couple?" Mrs. Rowe inquired wonderingly.

"I am afraid so; though I wouldn't say so to anybody else. Denis gave me a hint the other day, without the least intention of doing anything of the sort. He is an excellent fellow, but incapable of making allowances, quite devoid of nice perceptions, and as obstinate as a mule. There isn't, so far as I can judge, much harm in his wife, nor very much good either; but if anybody can draw out what good there is in her, you can, and I hope you will. Otherwise there is likely to be serious trouble."

"Some flirtation on her part, do you mean?—or only a craving to amuse herself and spend more money than she ought?"

"Both, I imagine; but it is the flirtation that signifies. You heard what that silly youth said at dinner. He has been making himself conspicuous with Mrs. Vale for the last year; everybody in London, if not in Trentshire, has noticed it, except Denis—who has probably begun to notice it now. To be sure, young Glyn is going to leave the country, and I doubt whether he would be really dangerous even if he were to remain where he is; yet there is, it seems to me, a very real danger that Denis and his wife may drift permanently apart. Won't you, like the

good woman that you are, intervene before it is too late?"

"I can but try. Now it is your turn to oblige. You are going to stay at Mount-Sorrel, aren't you?"

The bishop sighed. "I regret to say that I am. Lady Mount-Sorrel, backed by the Church Association (not that she needs anybody to back her), has summoned me, and needs must when Lady Mount-Sorrel drives. Don't ask me to take up the cudgels on behalf of the good vicar here, whom I sincerely esteem, but who is making my life a burden to me with his conscientious recalcitrancy."

"I am not so unreasonable as that: all I want you to do is to persuade Lady Mount-Sorrel to call at Beaulieu."

"As if anybody had ever persuaded Lady Mount-Sorrel to do anything!" cried the bishop, with uplifted hands. "I am very sorry, but I fear that it is out of my power even to mention, much less urge, the revolutionary step that you suggest. What puts it additionally out of the question is that Mrs. Asher has identified herself with the local clique which holds advanced Church views, and that Mr. Asher, from whom I have had promises of considerable pecuniary support, is a man whom I absolutely can't afford to offend."

"Well, according to Mr. Hallett, we shall all offend him unless we can secure him an invitation to dine at Mount-Sorrel. That he must have, or he won't take the hounds; and if he doesn't take the hounds, he is as likely as not to sell Beaulieu and turn his back upon the county. In which case, what would become of your promised pecuniary support?"

The bishop laughed ruefully. "Uneasy lies the head that wears a mitre!" he ejaculated. "So because

you and Hallett wish to have the country hunted free of expense, and because Mr. Asher is ruled by his wife, and because Mrs. Asher has foolish ambitions, and because I—small blame to me, surely!—want money for sanitary habitations and poor curates, a whole network of intrigue has to be spread, in which it is more than probable that I shall entangle my own gaitered legs. Well, well! I'll do what I can. But I warn you that I am almost sure to fail."

## CHAPTER V

### AMENITIES AT SOUTHACRE

"You've been crying, *you* have," said Dicky Vale, a close observer of all phenomena which came within the range of his sharp young eyes.

He spoke in the tone of one who states a discreditable fact and would be glad to hear some adequate explanation of the same. "Grown-up people oughtn't to cry," he gravely added; "it's different with babies, like Di."

"Little boys," returned his mother, conscious of red eyelids, "oughtn't to make remarks about the appearance of their elders and betters. I can't help having a cold in my head, but it is very bad manners to draw attention to a person's swollen features. I should have been smacked, when I was your age, for taking such a liberty."

Dicky considered this statement seriously for a moment. "Is that your hanky?" he asked, pointing to a diminutive square of lace-bordered cambric which lay, amongst newspapers, novels, and letters, upon the wicker table at Mrs. Vale's elbow. "You haven't blown your nose upon it much. Not the way *I* do when *I* have a cold."

"Dicky," returned his mother, with an irritated little laugh, while she lifted the child from her knees and set him down on his feet, "you are your father's

son! Which is another way of saying that, even at your tender age, you show symptoms of a boring, persistent disposition. Go and worry Di; her good-humour is proof against any attacks."

Dicky, intelligent though he was for his years, did not always understand what his mother was talking about; but he knew (it would have been no fault of hers if he had not) when she had had enough of him, and at such times he usually came to the philosophic conclusion that he had had enough of her. He obediently joined his sister, a small, stolid mortal who was lying supine upon the sunlit grass and, in defiance of all propriety, was brandishing a pair of fat legs above her head, while she contentedly crooned an unending, tuneless song to herself. Presently the couple, after exchanging whispered confidences, trotted off, hand in hand, across the lawn.

Barbara, reclining beneath the shade of an enormous Japanese umbrella, languidly hoped that they would not come to any harm, and supposed that their nurse must be somewhere about. She was fond of her children, who were fond of her, and she liked to have them with her sometimes, though apt to dismiss them as soon as they began to be tiresome. On this beautiful afternoon everybody and everything struck her as woefully tiresome; so much so that she had vague thoughts of drowning herself in the lake by moonlight and being found floating picturesquely upon the surface, like Delaroche's Christian martyr.

"Only, I suppose," she mused, "one doesn't really begin to float until one has become quite horrible to look at. Besides, I should never have the pluck. And then again, not a soul would care. It would be too absurd to commit suicide without harrowing anybody's



feelings. As for Denis, he would simply jump for joy, of course."

This she said not because she altogether believed it, but because she felt the need of bemoaning her cruel fate aloud, even though she had no auditor save a strutting peacock who was drawing nearer and nearer, under the impression that the hour of tea and cakes must be at hand. Her feelings with regard to her husband had passed, and were still passing, through many stages of vicissitude; wrath, penitence, despair, self-pity, exasperation—all these emotions had in turn held possession of her, and to not one of them had the man's cold imperturbability allowed her a chance of giving expression. No doubt she had behaved rather badly; but only for a moment—literally and absolutely only during that one moment when, by extraordinary ill-luck, the evidence of Denis's own senses had caused him to condemn her unheard. It is really monstrous to condemn people unheard! In common justice, he must have admitted, had he known all, that she could plead extenuating circumstances; but the truth, most likely, was that he did not care to be commonly just, that he had no wish to know all, that he was only too glad to be furnished with so excellent an excuse for at once breaking with her and holding her at his mercy. And what could she do? Why should she abase herself in the dust, to be met, as she assuredly would be, with mere polite, scornful incredulity? The upshot of it all was that she, who had done nothing actually wrong, who had firmly dismissed the amorous Ernest and had left unanswered a long and eloquent epistle which he had addressed to her on the eve of his departure, was to be treated for the rest of her days as though she had been no better than—— Here Mrs. Vale mentioned

numerous distinguished names which nothing would induce the present humble chronicler to write down. She then stamped her little foot on the ground, clinched her fist, and proclaimed aloud to the peacock and the blackbirds and the thrushes that she would not bear it. Yet she was painfully aware, all the time, that she would have to bear it.

A less serious trial which, it appeared, would have to be immediately borne was the intrusion of a caller. Barbara saw her advancing—a tall woman in a well-fitting white-and-black costume, preceded by the butler, bareheaded and blinking beneath the slant rays of the sun.

"Mrs. Rowe, ma'am," that functionary announced, and added in a mildly aggrieved undertone, "*I did* say that I believed you was in the garden."

"I have told you fifty times, Davis," returned Barbara, with subdued ferocity, "that when I am out I am out!"

Then she rose and advanced smilingly to meet the newcomer. "How nice of you to take pity upon me in my solitude!"

The two ladies had already exchanged visits, but had hitherto scarcely exchanged a dozen words, neither of them having felt particularly drawn towards the other. Now, however, Mrs. Rowe intended to make friends with her neighbour, and it was seldom that she failed in carrying out amicable intentions.

"I encountered your children just now," she said, in her low, pleasant voice; "what pretty, well-mannered children they are! But beauty is their birth-right."

"Thank you," answered Barbara; "I gratefully accept the half of that compliment. The other half, of course, belongs to Denis; but you don't go the

length of suggesting that the children's good manners are inherited, I notice. Mine are notoriously uncouth; as for my husband, he laboriously does his best, notwithstanding some natural disadvantages."

"I have always looked upon your husband as a perfect model of courtesy," Mrs. Rowe declared, taking the chair towards which she was motioned; "and I have known him from childhood."

"Other people's husbands often seem to be models of courtesy," remarked Barbara dryly; "one must marry a man in order to be able to appreciate his natural disadvantages."

"Oh, yes; only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches. Yet, when all deductions are made, it is better to be married than single, and infinitely better to be a mother than childless. Don't you think so?"

The question, which was an adroit one, produced the effect desired by the childless questioner. Barbara, vaguely suspicious and defiant of a lady who had known her husband so long and praised him so warmly, was at once moved to compassion. Modern she was, and prided herself upon being, in her domestic relations; but that pride of maternity and pity for women to whom the glory of maternity has been denied, which are as old as the world, survived in her, and it was with a perceptibly softened countenance, though in a flippant tone, that she replied:

"Children are not quite such bores as husbands, perhaps; still they are bad enough, and they keep one in a perpetual state of worry and anxiety, with their ailments and their naughtinesses."

"I only wish," returned the other, "that I had half your complaint. Mr. Vale may or may not be a bore; not being married to him, I can't pretend to judge. But I am quite sure that your son and your

daughter must be well worth any anxiety that they may cause you. My own marriage," she went on presently, "was not considered a very happy one by my friends. Yet I never regretted it. What I did regret, and shall regret to the end of my days, is that my only baby died within a few weeks of his birth."

It was very seldom that Angela Rowe alluded to the greatest sorrow and disappointment of her life. She did so now because she knew that the surest way of eliciting confidences is to bestow them, and because she had a sincere regard both for the Bishop of Blackhampton and for Denis Vale. A partial success rewarded her. Barbara's sympathies were aroused, and during the next quarter of an hour long steps were taken towards intimacy between the two women; which was as much as could be expected or aimed at in a first interview. Some of Barbara's grievances were stated, and were sympathetically acknowledged to be such, for Mrs. Rowe knew better than to begin by taking the absent husband's part; the stupefying effect of living down in the depths of the country from year's end to year's end (the complainant had never spent six consecutive months at Southacre since her marriage) was admitted, and the imperative need which every human being who has not yet sunk into sheer imbecility must experience for occasional converse with some congenial fellow-creature was not denied. But not a word was said about Ernest Glyn. Perhaps something would ultimately have been said about him—for Barbara, when once she began to talk, was the least circumspect of women—had not Denis astonished her and closed the flood-gates of her speech by appearing unexpectedly in the wake of the tea-table. He hastened to explain this

departure from recent habit; but the explanation was not addressed to his wife, at whom, indeed, he did not so much as glance.

"When I was told that you were here," he said, holding out his hand to Mrs. Rowe, "I felt that I must come and have a cup of tea with you, whether I was wanted or not. How is it that one never sees you in these days?"

"Well, nobody is more constantly on view than I am," she answered; "but I suppose you don't care to frequent the places where I am to be seen. You despise garden-parties, for instance."

"I do," Denis confessed, while he seated himself cross-legged upon the grass at her feet.

"I am giving one myself next week; but I am afraid there would be no use in begging you and Mrs. Vale to patronize it."

"Not the slightest. I wouldn't go to a garden-party," Denis declared, ignoring the allusion to his consort, "even for the privilege of meeting you. Though it really is a great privilege and a great pleasure to bask in the light of your countenance again, Angela."

"You *are* getting on!" exclaimed Mrs. Rowe, laughing. "At this rate you will soon be a match for Lord Mount-Sorrel, who has almost as poor an opinion as you have of women in general, and who told me, the other day, that I had occasional gleams of intelligence. Well, all I can say is that the light of my countenance shall be shed upon Southacre as often as you like to honour me by asking for it."

"Then you may as well spare yourself trouble by sending over to Brayton at once for your maid and a supply of clothing. But I am afraid you are as insincere as the rest of your sex, Angela. I say it

with sorrow; for I have always up to now looked upon you as a sort of *lusus naturæ*, a perfectly honest and straightforward woman."

"You began it, Denis. You shouldn't have made flattering allusions to my poor old colourless countenance, which, as you very well know, only shines after a day with the hounds in rough weather. Its illuminating powers are remarkable then, I must own."

"By the way, tell me—you probably know a good deal more about it than I do—what is going to be done about the hounds? Does Asher mean taking them or not?"

"He won't say positively; diplomatic negotiations are going on. I am inclined to hope that he will end by accepting; although I sometimes think that I should be almost better pleased if the mastership were left in commission for a season. Then, I presume, George Hallett would act for the Committee, which would give him a thoroughly happy winter. And the country would be well hunted too."

"Oh, if somebody would leave Hallett a fortune, he would be the ideal man for the job, no doubt. But miracles don't happen, unluckily. Have you been up to the kennels lately? I'm no judge of hounds myself; but I thought that the puppies they sent me to walk promised well."

At this point Barbara yawned aloud. Next to politics and agriculture, the subject of kennel management was, by her way of thinking, the most tedious and wearisome that could be started. It was, moreover, only too obvious to her that during the above colloquy her existence had been clean forgotten. Mrs. Rowe turned to her with an apologetic laugh.

"You see how it is. Whenever two or three Trentshire people are gathered together they begin

at once to talk as your husband and I have been talking. You will have to take to hunting in self-defence."

"I would rather take to my heels," answered Barbara somewhat ungraciously; "but I am not even allowed to adopt that inoffensive course. As for hunting, that is very carefully put out of my reach. We never have a lady's horse in the stables."

"The brown horse would carry a baby in perfect safety," said Denis, addressing his wife for the first time; "he is quite at your service."

"Is he, indeed? Then I will ride him to-morrow, please."

"I meant, of course, by next winter. The horse, as I thought you knew, has his shoes off now."

Barbara laughed unamiably. "What do I know about him or his shoes? I only know that when he has them on again, something else will certainly prevent his being available for me. Rest assured," she said explanatorily to her visitor, "that you will never see me following the hounds. If there is a thing that Denis absolutely bars, it is the presence of women in the hunting-field. I suppose he makes an exception in your favour, though."

"Mrs. Rowe can ride," Denis observed.

"Isn't he polite!" exclaimed Barbara.

There was a brief pause, during which Mrs. Rowe came to the conclusion that that topic had better not be persisted with. Reverting to the one with which she had hitherto done best, she began:

"I wish you would let your children come over to Brayton some day. I think I could manage to amuse them, and I know they would amuse me."

But Barbara, who was ruffled, did not care to be spoken to as though she herself were a spoilt child.

"Very kind of you, I'm sure," she answered coldly, "but I am afraid they are rather too small to be inflicted upon strangers yet, thanks."

"Mrs. Rowe," said Denis, "is not a stranger, and I am quite sure that she wouldn't find Dicky and Di an infliction."

"I really do think," protested Barbara, "that I might be allowed some authority over the children. Isn't that sort of thing my sole *raison d'être*, according to you? You demand a stay-at-home wife; you insist upon her staying at home, lest she should succumb to the manifold temptations of London life and misbehave herself. Very well; but then you ought at least to let her practise the time-honoured domestic virtues as well as she can. Otherwise you risk—well, I leave you to imagine what you risk. Yours is such an active imagination."

Denis made no reply to an outburst which struck him as lamentably vulgar and uncalled-for. He rose presently, and remarked that he must be off; whereupon Mrs. Rowe judged that the moment had come for her also to withdraw. She was not likely, she thought, to do much more good that afternoon.

Denis escorted her to her carriage, and Barbara made a little grimace at the backs of the retreating couple, as they walked across the lawn together. They were talking about her, of course; well, they were quite welcome!

It scarcely needs to be said that Mrs. Vale's name was not mentioned in the course of a dialogue which lasted some ten minutes or so: Denis was as little likely to discuss his wife with anybody as Angela Rowe was to be guilty of the indiscretion imputed to her. Nevertheless, the former had been a good deal vexed by Barbara's behaviour; so much so that



he returned to the garden for the purpose of remonstrating with her.

"Don't you think," said he, as he approached the chair in which she was reclining, with a cigarette between her lips (he detested smoking women, and she knew it), "that it is rather bad form to quarrel in public?"

"Shocking," she answered tranquilly; "who has been doing it?"

"You have been trying to do it, and I really can't imagine why. Nor can I understand your object in being rude to Angela Rowe, who evidently wishes to make friends with you, and who is quite the nicest woman in these parts."

"It is very evident, anyhow, that you think her so. Perhaps her having turned up, uninvited by me, this afternoon, is only one more proof of your thoughtfulness and kindly desire for my welfare. Or was it that you yourself were eager, as you professed to be, to bask in the sunshine of her broad smiles?"

"I didn't ask her to come," answered Denis shortly; "don't talk nonsense. Why did you snub her?"

"My dear man, how often must I remind you that you can't expect to have everything your own way? You are virtuous, while I am wicked—that is understood; and I ought, no doubt, to be profoundly grateful to you for still permitting me to share the joys of your attractive life. But if you ask me to embrace all your female friends and to behave in their presence as though I humbly worshipped you, you ask just a little bit too much."

Denis shrugged his shoulders. "All I ask of you," said he, "is that you should make some effort to keep up appearances; and I ask that a great deal

more for your own sake than for mine. However, please yourself."

He stalked off, and Barbara, with tears of vexation in her eyes, flung away the end of her cigarette.

"How clumsy he is!" she muttered. "I like that woman, and I thought we were going to get on well together; but he must needs spoil everything by coming and thrusting his oar in. Of course I shall see no more of his angelic Angela now."

## CHAPTER VI

### LADY MOUNT-SORREL

UPON an eminence, dominating acres of stiff pleasure-grounds and square miles of well-timbered park, stands that huge, white Palladian structure known as Mount-Sorrel, celebrated far beyond the confines of Trentshire for its palm-houses, its library, and the priceless art treasures which its long galleries contain. Open to the public on Wednesdays and Fridays throughout the year, it is largely invaded during the summer months by trippers from Blackhampton and sundry neighbouring watering-places, and is therefore more imposing than desirable as a residence for quiet folks such as its actual owner. Sight-seers, plodding through the gardens in batches on fine afternoons, sometimes catch a glimpse of a middle-aged, untidy gentleman with a ragged beard and gold-rimmed spectacles, whose coat-tails flutter out behind him as he skips nimbly down a side-alley. This is the ninth Earl of Mount-Sorrel, imploring peace and deprecating attention. Or it may be that, while about to traverse one of the broad walks, they are suddenly arrested by the uplifted hand of their conductor and are ordered in hushed accents to stand on one side. Then there appears before their respectful gaze a donkey-chair, in which is seated a little old lady, white as to her hair, black as to her eyebrows, benevolent

of aspect and gently expectant of due salutes. But if—as will happen from time to time, even under the most vigilant supervision—some member of the party should have feloniously plucked a flower in passing, the old lady's eyes will of a surety detect the culprit, and a clear, high-pitched voice will ring out, "Take down that person's name and address."

It is upon record that one Mary Ann Williams, of Blackhampton, thus caught red-handed and dismissed with ignominy, under escort, to the break which had brought her to the scene of her crime, received, the next day, a missive, adorned with a gilded coronet and a lozenge of many quarterings, which, when opened, was found to contain the following grave warning:

"MARY ANN WILLIAMS: Thou shalt not steal. Remember by Whom this was said, and the awful destiny which must inevitably await hereafter those who dare to disobey His commands. Temporal punishment will likewise, as the law directs, be inflicted upon any visitors to the Mount-Sorrel estate who, abusing the hospitality accorded to them, do wilful damage to plants, shrubs, or trees. If in the present instance it has been decided not to prosecute, this must not be regarded as a precedent. Strive to be an honest girl for the future, and bear in mind that if you are not, you will be sent to prison in your lifetime and to an even worse place when you die.

"I am, Mary Ann,

"Your obedient servant,

"JANE MOUNT-SORREL."

Jane, Countess of Mount-Sorrel, had, during a brief period of time, been the dowager countess. She had not altogether enjoyed that passing experience of

eclipse, and when, after her daughter-in-law's premature decease, she had resumed the reins of government, there had been little expectation or intention in her mind of relinquishing them again until she should be borne forth in a permanently recumbent pose to join many silent predecessors. She had done her duty by marrying her son to an estimable lady who had unfortunately failed to provide the family with an heir in the direct line; she could not undertake to find a second wife for Mount-Sorrel even if he had desired one—which he quite emphatically and outspokenly did not. His lordship was not at all a marrying man; he only asked to be left to his scientific researches, which had won for him a certain renown, and since (after repeatedly blowing himself up) he had abandoned experimental chemistry for the equally engrossing and far less dangerous study of astronomy, his mother was not unwilling to comply with a request so inoffensive.

She herself was not always inoffensive, though she always wished and tried to be. In the discharge of important public and religious duties it cannot be but that offence should be occasionally given, and Lady Mount-Sorrel, as a staunch upholder of evangelical principles, had every now and again to make herself rather disagreeable to her neighbours. This, however, was for their good, and she prayed daily that they might be brought to see it in that light. The Bishop of Blackhampton once declared that he could never for the life of him make out whether Lady Mount-Sorrel was serious or not; but he was perhaps the only person who entertained any doubt upon that question. The consequences of incurring her ladyship's displeasure were apt, at all events, to be serious enough.

Now, the bishop, who had been holding a confirmation hard by, arrived at Mount-Sorrel late one afternoon, in response to an invitation which had been virtually equivalent to a summons. He would gladly have excused himself, being very busy, and anxious, so far as in him lay, to steer clear of controversy; but as, for several reasons, it was impossible for him to do that, he drove up to the main entrance with his chaplain between five and six o'clock, and was greeted on the door-step by his host, with whom he had for many years been upon friendly terms.

"Come out into the rose-garden," said Lord Mount-Sorrel, in his thin, falsetto voice. "This is Thursday, so we shall be safe from snipers, thank goodness!"

"Whom do you call snipers?" the bishop asked, while he descended a flight of shallow marble steps and, removing his hat, breathed the fragrance which arose from thousands of freshly syringed blooms. For the soil of Trentshire is highly esteemed by rose-growers, and nowhere in England does the queen of flowers flourish more abundantly than at Mount-Sorrel.

"People who lie in wait to take snap-shots at me with kodaks and things," answered the other plaintively. "I can't think why they should, when they might so easily turn their attention to more interesting subjects; but they do, and it makes me horribly uncomfortable. Not a cloud in the sky! Dear me, what bad luck that we should have friends here to-night—of all nights in the year!"

"Thank you," said the bishop.

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of you; I am sure you would not mind my leaving you after dinner. But there are others coming to dine—the Glyns and Mrs.

Rowe, and I forget who else. I must give up all hope of observing the occultation of Saturn, I am afraid. By the way, you have heard the news, I suppose."

"I suppose so. It is more or less my business to hear all the news that there is."

"The discovery of a ninth satellite to Saturn, I mean."

"Alas, no! I was not even aware that he had already as many as eight. Sublunary phenomena claim the whole of my time and attention, and some of them are rather troublesome. Would it, I wonder, trouble you very much to add one to the number of your personal satellites? Mr. Asher—I don't think you know him, do you?"

Lord Mount-Sorrel shook his head and combed his beard with his long, nervous fingers. "Asher? No—no; I don't know him. I know the house that Asher built."

"Exactly so. It is a very fine place, and the fact of his having built it gives him, or ought to give him, a sort of position in the county; don't you think so? I may say that he has become a prominent person in the diocese by his liberality, which is second only to your own."

"Have I been liberal?" asked Lord Mount-Sorrel absently. "Of course one wishes to be, and it is one's duty to be; but——"

"Oh, I know," interrupted the bishop, laughing, "the important business of life is star-gazing. That is all right, so long as it doesn't blind you to ordinary obligations, one of which I really think is to call upon Mr. and Mrs. Asher."

Lord Mount-Sorrel was visibly startled. "Oh, but this is another thing," he expostulated. "If I can

be of service individually to Mr. Asher, or to any other friend of yours, I shall be only too glad, I'm sure; but calling—well, that isn't my department, you see. I must refer you to my mother, who decides all questions of that kind."

"Don't you think that a word from you would go farther with Lady Mount-Sorrel than any representations of mine?"

"No, I don't," his lordship answered decisively; "in fact, I am quite positive that it wouldn't. She has no opinion of me as a social discriminator, and I am bound to own that my opinion of her would sink if she had. No, no. I am quite useless for such purposes—I am indeed. You must fight it out with her, if there is any fighting to be done. Ah! and in the nick of time, here she comes," concluded his lordship, with evident relief.

Lady Mount-Sorrel's donkey-chair appeared round an angle of the house, and advanced along the gravel walk, while her son hurriedly retired. The bishop approached her, hat in hand, and was greeted with the old-fashioned deference which she never failed to display towards dignitaries of the Church.

"My dear lord, it is such a pleasure to welcome you, though only for one night."

"It is always a pleasure to me to spend a night under your hospitable roof," the bishop declared, with pardonable insincerity; "more than a night, I can't, in these busy times, spare to the kindest of my friends."

"I suppose not. Well, I hope you can spare time to take a turn with me until the dressing-bell rings; for there are several subjects upon which I am anxious to obtain spiritual advice."

The bishop suppressed a sigh, knowing by ex-



perience what that meant. Lady Mount-Sorrel was ever more prone to give advice, or, if need were, rebukes, than to accept the same, and from the somewhat exaggerated gentleness of her always gentle manner he guessed that a bad quarter of an hour was in store for him. However, since escape was out of the question, he smiled benevolently and started to accompany her on her daily round through the shrubberies, putting his best leg foremost to keep pace with the hurrying donkey, whom she guided by means of a crutch-handled stick.

"You will have a bad accident one of these days," he predicted; "I can't imagine a more dangerous vehicle than a bath-chair, drawn by an obviously wilful animal."

"He did turn me over last week, running up a bank," remarked Lady Mount-Sorrel pensively; "but there was no harm done. He soon kicked himself free."

"Kicked himself free! But he might easily have kicked your brains out in the process!"

"No; I thought of that. I wrapped a shawl round my head and got under the apron, where I lay quite comfortably until one of the under-gardeners came and picked me up."

She was a diminutive old lady, who, with her snowy hair and bright black eyes, much resembled a white mouse. Her courage was beyond dispute, and she presently gave her companion a sample of that fine quality by saying, in her mild, high accents:

"Forgive my presumption, my lord, but I must pluck a crow with you. How comes it that the Vicar of Glyn, in defiance of law and order, continues—as I am assured that he does—the use of incense and processional lights?"

"The practices of which you complain have not been brought to my notice officially," answered the bishop. "Moreover, it cannot yet be said positively that such practices are illegal. They have been pronounced so, it is true, as a matter of opinion, by the archbishops; but——"

"Have not you yourself pronounced them so, my lord?"

"Well, I have signified that I concur in the archbishops' opinion, and I have requested my clergy to discontinue the use of incense and processional lights. I saw nothing of the kind when I was at Glyn a short time ago, and I do not mind confessing to you that it would be a great blow to me if Mr. Doddridge were driven to resign his benefice. He has worked wonders in the parish, which is a difficult one to manage."

"I have no doubt he pretends to work miracles. Let him honestly avow allegiance to the Pope of Rome, who will gladly sanction such impious goings-on; there is no place for them in our Reformed Protestant Church. As for his parish, it got on very well before he came to it."

"I assure you it got on very badly indeed, and the nail-makers who form the staple of its population were virtual heathens until he took them in hand. Come now, Lady Mount-Sorrel; can you, as a Christian and a remarkably intelligent woman, believe that a pinch of incense ought to count in comparison with the salvation of immortal souls?"

"The early Christian martyrs," returned her ladyship, not at all mollified by this compliment, "lost their lives and saved their souls by refusing to drop a handful of incense upon the altars of false gods."

"I don't think that is quite a parallel case," said the bishop.

"I do," Lady Mount-Sorrel declared, whacking the donkey with her stick.

The result of this method of emphasizing her religious views was that she was incontinently whirled off at a high rate of speed and vanished into the green depths of the adjoining copse. The bishop, giving chase, overtook her presently half-way up a hill, which had apparently exercised a sobering influence upon the donkey.

"Comes of giving him oats, I suppose," she remarked placidly. "Mount-Sorrel says he ought to be fed upon straw; but Mount-Sorrel can scarcely be considered an expert. Would you kindly go to his head for a minute, while I look for a letter which I have written to the Times, but preferred not to post before submitting it to you?"

She dived into her pocket, whence she produced the document in question. "You will observe," she continued, "that I have not mentioned you by name, and I am sure you will believe me when I say that nothing is more repugnant to my feelings than stirring up strife. Nevertheless, it does seem to me that the time has come when those who value the Protestant principles bequeathed to us by our forefathers should no longer remain silent."

The bishop perused the sheet handed to him, which set forth an eloquent appeal to the episcopate of England to do its duty. That it was not at present doing its duty was evidenced by specified instances of laxity and pusillanimity which were asserted to be within the writer's personal knowledge.

"I call this a very mischievous letter," said he.

"I am very sorry to hear you say so, my lord.

Is it mischievous, then, to urge that you should insist upon the obedience of those who have solemnly sworn to obey you?"

"Well, yes, I think it is. We are doing the best we can under circumstances of exceptional difficulty, and if we are left alone, a *modus vivendi* will eventually be established; but if we act as you, and others like you, would have us act, it is easy to foresee what will very soon be disestablished. Now, Lady Mount-Sorrel, you know very well that I am no Romanizer. Have a little patience, and allow me to tear up this composition of yours."

"H'm! I took a great deal of trouble in composing it."

"Nothing like the trouble that you will give me by publishing it."

"Well, well; tear it up, then. Only upon the condition, however, that you order the Vicar of Glyn to amend his ways."

"I will write to Doddridge," the bishop promised, promptly reducing the letter to fragments and offering them to the donkey, who, after snuffing them, blew them disdainfully out of his hand; "as a concession to you, I will write to him. Now will you, in return, do me a small favour?"

"Dear, dear," sighed the old lady, "how the grasping ecclesiastical spirit comes out there! I give in to you without a murmur; I submit to be gagged, merely stipulating that you shall rebuke a wolf in sheep's clothing, whom I don't for one minute believe that you will adequately rebuke; and then, not content with having driven such a hard bargain, you instantly ask for more! And I remember you such a nice, simple, honest boy, too, in the days gone by! Well, what do you want now? Am I to embroider a cope for you?"

"I should greatly value a testimonial of that kind, coming from your hands, and I should be proud to wear it in compliance with the directions of the rubric; but my request, as a matter of fact, is of a far more modest order. I only want you, if you will be so kind, to take some neighbourly notice of Mr. and Mrs. Asher, who, as you are doubtless aware, have recently settled themselves in the county."

The old lady laid her head a little on one side and looked up at her spiritual adviser with a twinkle in her eye which had almost the effect of a wink. "How much money," she inquired demurely, "have you screwed out of that usurer?"

"I don't think usury is his trade. He has been very generous, very benevolent, and if he can only be induced to remain permanently in these parts——"

"Ah, yes, I see. If, for instance, he can only be induced to take the hounds, eh?"

"Have you heard about that?"

"I hear so many things. In defence of myself and my defenceless son, I am compelled to listen to them. Your Jew seems to be a clever man. Who would have thought of his enlisting the sympathies of a Christian bishop!"

"As far as that goes, he himself is a Christian, and his Jewish birth ought surely not to count against him. We must remember that the Hebrews were the chosen people."

"Very true," agreed Lady Mount-Sorrel, adding meekly, "For my own part, I have learnt, I hope, to call nothing common or unclean. Nevertheless, it is a long drive to Beaulieu—isn't that the absurd name that they have given to the Red House?—and I am an old woman."

"I really don't think that the fatigue would be too much for you," said the bishop.

"Don't you? Well, I must consider it."

"May I tell Mrs. Asher that you are considering it?"

"Certainly you may not! When Mr. Doddridge—whom, by the way, I understand that this *protégée* of yours supports—has been rebuked and brought under discipline, we will see. But I promise nothing. You can't, after tearing my letter to bits under my nose, expect me to promise anything, except that I won't write another just at present."

"But at least you are not prejudiced against Jews, as Jews?"

"How can you ask such a question! One might perhaps be prejudiced against usurers, as usurers, or against vulgar people, as vulgar people. But that, no doubt, would be sinful pride, and it cannot be necessary to tell you how free I am from anything of the sort. The tribe of Asher will have to wait, though; first and foremost, that incense-pot and those candles must be extinguished, if you please. Now be so good as to turn the donkey round, and we will go and get ready for dinner."

Lady Mount-Sorrel was in a benign humour at dinner that evening. She had a large number of guests, and she profited by a pause in the general conversation to announce in dulcet accents that the bishop of the diocese was quite of one mind with her respecting the illegality of certain ritualistic observances. Then she reduced Lady Helen Glyn to the verge of tears by condoling with her upon the probable departure of her parish priest and father-confessor.

"It will be a blow for you, of course; but it is a

case of *se soumettre ou se demettre*, you see, and—whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth. I cannot but hope that the substitution of a decent English parson for a Jesuit in disguise will, under Providence, be blessed to you all in the long-run.” Finally, she called down the table to Mrs. Rowe, “Tell me, Angela dear, you who are so familiar with both, what connection is there between hunting the fox and religious enthusiasm?”

“Is it a riddle?” Mrs. Rowe asked; “if so, I give it up.”

“I know,” said Lord Mount-Sorrel. “Both are certain to cost a lot of money and neither can be pronounced safe.”

“It is not a riddle,” his mother gently resumed; “although to dull old brains like mine it has a little of the appearance of an enigma. Perhaps, after all, no connection exists; I only fancied, from what the bishop was saying to me this afternoon, that there must be some.”

“Is she,” Mrs. Rowe subsequently asked the bishop, “going to call at Beaulieu?”

“I can’t tell you; but I am afraid not,” he mournfully made reply. “In the meantime, I have undertaken to expostulate with Doddridge, who will respectfully defy me. I warned you, as you may remember, that I should fail. What about the mission to our friends at Southacre, with which I made so bold as to charge you? Has that also resulted in failure?”

“It has not resulted in a complete success, so far,” Mrs. Rowe acknowledged. “Denis ruined my first attempt by appearing unexpectedly upon the scene. But I am not beaten, and I am interested. I shall try again by-and-bye.”

The bishop nodded approvingly. "You will triumph; you invariably do. As for me, I am fain to consider myself fortunate, as well as adroit, if I can sometimes bring about a species of bad-tempered compromise."

"That," Mrs. Rowe modestly declared, "is as much as I can hope to achieve for the present in the case of Denis Vale and his wife. It is at least better than a good-humoured split."

Then a footman stepped up, with her ladyship's compliments, to inquire at what hour it would be convenient to his lordship to take part in family prayer.



## CHAPTER VII

### MRS. ASHER SCORES ONE

GEORGE HALLETT, driving his roan cobs tandem, turned neatly into the stable-yard at Five Oaks, as the rambling farm-house which he inhabited was called, and consulted his watch by the light of the moon.

"Three minutes over the hour," he remarked; "I don't call that so bad. And they haven't turned a hair, as you see."

"A very creditable performance," Denis Vale agreed, lowering himself to the ground from the high cart and yawning; "almost as creditable as your speech to an assemblage of farmers and yokels who ended by giving you three cheers, though they knew no more than the dead what you had been talking about. But your horses are always in tip-top condition, George, and you yourself are always there or thereabouts when wanted. I suppose that sort of thing does some good?—the political oratory, I mean."

"In a negative way it does. Probably we don't gain votes by holding these meetings; but we should certainly lose a lot if we didn't hold them. Also, your presence on the platform counts for something, which must console you for the loss of your dinner and for an hour and a half of unrelieved boredom. Now come indoors, and we will see what my housekeeper can do for us in the shape of rough food."

The repast to which these two weary and hungry gentlemen presently sat down in a low-ceiled, oak-panelled dining-room was not rough; for George Hallett's cook was an excellent one. He was a man who took some trouble to obtain the best that was to be had for his money, and who generally did obtain it, because he understood and looked into everything personally. Grooms did not dare to scamp their work with that keen, quick eye ever upon them; cooks recognised the futility of offering plausible excuses to a master who knew just as well as they did why omelettes are leathery or soup badly cleared; farm-labourers toiled honestly for one who, being just as well as generous, would keep no drones in his employment. And, like most men of that thorough, energetic type, he was popular. Without much apparent effort, he made his fellow-mortals do what he wanted them to do, getting, as a general rule, their gratitude in addition to their obedience. Perhaps Denis Vale may not have been consciously grateful for having been dragged at a most inconvenient hour to a political gathering on the outskirts of Blackhampton; but at least he had done what had been represented to him in the light of a duty, and his admiration for the friend who had exacted this sacrifice of him was very sincere.

"You are a wonderful fellow, George," he remarked after he had been comforted with a second glass of old port and lighted a cigar; "you ought to be prime minister or something of that kind. I suppose you would be prime minister if you wanted to be."

"Oh no, I shouldn't. My success, such as it has been and is, is due to the circumstance that I never want impossibilities."

"Lucky beggar! I am not sure that I quite believe you, though. Wouldn't you, for instance, like very well to be master of the North Trent Hounds?"

"I should like it; I don't want it, simply because I know that it isn't a possible thing for me."

"Events might make it possible. You might inherit a fortune or marry a woman with money."

Denis strolled to the open window and, dropping his elbow on the sill, gazed out upon the moonlit pastures which surrounded his friend's dwelling. "I wonder you don't," he said presently.

"Come into a fortune?"

"No; marry the rich woman whom you ought to have married long ago."

"I asked her to marry me when she wasn't a rich woman," answered the other. "You know that; it is everybody's secret."

"All the more reason for asking her again now. She can't imagine that her wealth is the attraction."

"I am not sure about that; but I am perfectly sure that if I were to ask her the second time, I should be refused the second time. We are very good friends as it is. I prefer keeping her friendship to disgusting with vain importunities."

"Nobody is advising you to be importunate; it is only very humbly suggested to you that you shouldn't throw up the sponge before you have been beaten. Heaven forbid," Denis went on, "that I should advise any friend of mine to marry for the sake of marrying; I firmly believe that four marriages out of six are ghastly mistakes. But Angela Rowe is exceptional; whoever marries her—and somebody will, mind you—will draw a prize. Besides which, you owe it to the county to make an effort. Just think how grateful we should all be if you were to

take the hounds and deliver us from the jaws of Asher!"

"You are a nice, disinterested sort of counsellor," George remarked dryly.

"I make so bold as to flatter myself that I am. Seriously, old man, your chance is at least as good as anybody else's, and Angela, if I know her, is much too confoundedly disinterested to remain satisfied with the blessings of solitude and independence. The end of it will be that she will throw herself away upon another Rowe, unless you look out. Won't you come and meet her at luncheon to-morrow?"

"Oh, yes; I'll do that, thanks," answered Hallett, laughing. "I am always glad to meet her, though I have no illusions. As you say, she will probably end by throwing herself away again—upon that young puppy Ernest Glyn, perhaps—and it isn't any protests of mine that will stop her."

"Do you mean to tell me," asked Denis in surprise, "that Ernest Glyn is a candidate?"

"So they say. His papa and mamma would like him to be, anyhow, and most likely he is not unwilling to oblige them."

"I see. Well, he is an exile for the present, and I presume he won't get leave of absence from his post for a year or more. Meanwhile, it may interest you to hear that Angela is to be seen at Southacre on most days of the week now."

He did not exaggerate. At the cost of some patience and forbearance, Mrs. Rowe had carried into effect her resolution to make friends with Denis Vale's wife, and the two ladies were already well-nigh inseparable. Barbara, always under the sway of impulse and emotion, had surrendered quite suddenly, on discovering that Angela was the only person in the

world who really understood her, and surrender in her case implied complete abandonment of all reserve. Her confidante was not only fully informed of all Denis's personal shortcomings, but was further told (of course under promise of the strictest secrecy) how it had come to pass that his insulting demeanour and his ostentatious indifference could no longer be resented. What remained obscure was the actual condition of Barbara's sentiments with regard to him and Ernest Glyn; which was the less surprising inasmuch as Barbara herself would have been puzzled to define them. She was not pressed to do so, nor was she scolded. She had to do with a well-wisher who was prudent and clear-sighted as well as sympathetic, and who perceived that such elements of danger as the situation might contain were, for the time being, remote. There was little more to be done, Mrs. Rowe thought, than to establish herself as firmly as might be in the affections of one who was at least affectionate, and thus to make pretty sure of being consulted when the inevitable crisis should supervene. In pursuit of that laudable aim, she listened with really sublime toleration to endless complaints, and never once took Denis's part in reply, deep though her inward commiseration for him was. She began, moreover, to grow fond of Barbara also; for her heart was a comprehensive one in every sense of the word.

"Oh, isn't it a bore!" Mrs. Vale exclaimed one day, as she entered the library, where her friend had been for some time awaiting her; "Denis is going to lunch at home, and he has asked that wearisome Mr. Hallett too, it seems. He never dreams of telling me about such things; it was only through my maid that I happened to hear of it."

"Never mind," answered Angela consolingly; "I

will take George Hallett off your hands. He doesn't weary me."

"And leave Denis and me to entertain one another? That will indeed be delightful for us both. No; you will have to devote yourself to my amiable husband, who is so devoted to you that I am sure he is only lunching here to-day for the pleasure of meeting you, and I must do the best I can with the heavy Hallett. They will both of them have the grace to retire early in the afternoon, I should hope."

They were not so obliging as that, although in other respects they behaved quite nicely. Denis had wisely come to the conclusion that his habit of treating his wife as non-existent could not well be maintained in the presence of outsiders, and during luncheon he included her in the general conversation, which he took some pains to keep alive; while George Hallett, though not fond of Mrs. Vale, endeavoured to suit his remarks to his company, so far as she was concerned. Nevertheless since he was not at Southacre in order to talk to his hostess, he showed no disposition to take leave of her after a cup of coffee and a cigarette on the terrace, nor did he rise when Denis, muttering something about an appointment with the bailiff, withdrew.

The summer was by this time at its height—one of those long, hot, dry summers for which the close of the nineteenth century will be gratefully remembered by the inhabitants of these islands. The air was still, sulky, and full of the sleepy hum of insects; bees and butterflies hovered in a shimmering haze above the many-coloured flower-borders; every now and again a light breeze rose and fell, stirring the great limes and oaks in the park; and from the corner

of the terrace, shaded by the house, where a tent had been set up, a fairly wide prospect of hill and dale and soft blue distances could be surveyed.

"This sort of weather," remarked Mrs. Rowe, "makes one glad to be alive."

"It makes me regret the day of my birth," Barbara petulantly returned; "I feel that such a magnificent setting to such a wretchedly poor thing as life in these parts is too utterly thrown away and out of place. What is the use of sunshine and blue skies when there is nothing on earth to be done beneath them from morning to night?"

George Hallett admitted that he personally preferred winter to summer. "All the same," he added, "I can't say that I often find myself short of a job at any season of the year. What with one's bit of farming and county council business and one thing and another, there are never quite enough hours in the day, somehow."

Barbara's eyes expressed in plain and pointed language her reluctance to detain so busy a man any longer; but he ignored the unspoken dismissal and went on:

"Of course one doesn't get one's proper amount of physical exertion just now; but cubbing will begin in a few weeks, thank goodness. You'll come out, won't you?"

"Well, I don't know," answered Mrs. Rowe, to whom the question was addressed; "one ain't supposed to turn up without some sort of an invitation, is one? Who is going to act as master?"

"I believe I am, provisionally. So please consider yourself very humbly and cordially invited. I know you are not one of the people who object to getting up early for the sake of sport."

"Are you," inquired Barbara plaintively, "going to talk about hunting? I only ask because, if you are, I will go indoors and write a few letters."

"Not another word shall be breathed upon the subject," Mrs. Rowe declared.

But Hallett protested. "Awfully sorry if it bores you, Mrs. Vale; only I must just tell Mrs. Rowe how we stand with our negotiations. It's rather important, you see, and I may not have another opportunity for some time to come. I won't be longer about it than I can help."

"That," observed Barbara, getting up and heaving a deep sigh, "means, I am sure, that I needn't hurry over my letters. I will return to you by-and-bye, Angela, if you don't come in to me."

"You have driven her away," said Mrs. Rowe reproachfully, when Barbara's pink gown had vanished round an angle of the house.

"Yes," agreed Hallett, with unabashed cheerfulness. "She wanted to drive me away, you know; so that's all fair." He resumed meditatively, after a pause, "She is a trashy little woman."

"Not in reality; she seems so to you because you don't know her and because she chooses to talk in a silly way sometimes. Besides, you think all women trashy in your heart, don't you?"

"Nine out of ten, perhaps. I can appreciate the tenth one when I see her, though, and I joyfully confess that I see her now."

"Thank you. Well, how about your negotiations with Mr. Asher?"

"Oh, at a stand-still, I believe. I haven't heard anything fresh."

"But you said you wanted to give me an account of them."



"And you at once guessed that what I wanted to do was to get rid of Mrs. Vale."

"I can't guess why you did."

Her untroubled face, at which he glanced up quickly, answered for the sincerity of the assertion. Like many women whose claim to beauty depends solely upon expression, she thought herself much plainer than she really was, and although she had not forgotten that George Hallett had once upon a time wanted to marry her, she considered it in the last degree improbable that he, or anybody else, could be enamoured of her now. Nor was his rejoinder of a nature to open her eyes.

"Well, one likes to have an undisturbed chat with an old friend every now and then," was all that he said.

What he professed to desire was very willingly accorded to him. He was encouraged to speak of his affairs, his pursuits, his modest ambitions; nobody could have been kinder or more sympathizing than his old friend. Yet every word that she uttered rendered it increasingly evident to him that he would never have the right to call her more than a friend; and this, though only what he had expected, was not precisely exhilarating.

"The worst of you," he exclaimed abruptly and almost roughly at length, "is that you are everybody's friend. You have something nice and pleasant to say to us all."

"But if that is true," she returned, laughing a little, "surely that must be the best of me."

"No; it stirs up discontent and bad feeling. You may call me a dog in the manger, if you like; I dare say I deserve to be called something of the kind; but——"

A speech which promised interesting development was cut short at this point by the apparition of a tall lady in gay and rustling attire who, outstripping the attendant butler, advanced rapidly along the terrace.

"Dear Mrs. Rowe," she cried, "I have been scouring the country in search of you. Your servants told me you had been lunching here, so I drove over in this direction, hoping that we might meet on the road; but as you were nowhere to be seen, I took my courage in both hands, and—behold me! How do you do, Mr. Hallett? Is this an unpardonably cool proceeding on my part, do you think?"

Mr. Hallett, being very decidedly of opinion that it was, responded only by a grunt; but Mrs. Rowe answered for him after a fashion which justified the character he had just given her.

"I am only afraid you must have found it a rather hot proceeding, Mrs. Asher," said she, smiling; "I am so sorry that you should have had to pursue me under this blazing sun. But here I am, you see, very much at your service. Won't you sit down and share our shade?"

Mrs. Asher seated herself. "What luck," she exclaimed, "to have discovered you alone! Not, to be sure, that you *are* alone—I have added to my enormities by interrupting a *tête-à-tête*, I'm afraid—but at least Mrs. Vale is not with you. I can't tell you how shy I felt while I was being conducted to your retreat."

She did not look shy, nor was Mrs. Vale a very formidable personage. Angela Rowe reassuringly mentioned the latter fact.

"Oh, but, my dear—a Trentshire lady who has never called upon me! Imagine the unheard-of pre-

sumption of the thing! However, the risk really had to be run; it was simply indispensable that I should get a list of the rubbish that you want me to order for your bazaar before I go up to London to-morrow."

The pretext fell palpably short of verisimilitude, but it may be assumed that Mrs. Asher cared little about that. Presumptuously or otherwise, she had effected an entrance into the domains of Lady Mount-Sorrel's grand-daughter, and if she was not quite so pleased as she pretended to be by that lady's absence, she was not yet at the end of her resources. All she had to do was to sit tight until Mrs. Vale should see fit to emerge from the house. That Mrs. Vale was in the house she had ascertained by inquiry.

Tight, therefore, she sat by the space of a quarter of an hour, despite some unskilful efforts on the part of George Hallett to dislodge her, and in due course her persistence met with its deserved reward. Barbara, released from the fatigues of correspondence, stepped forth to find that the stolid George had been re-enforced, and an introduction to the new intruder was of course unavoidable.

"I am quite ashamed," Mrs. Asher beamingly declared, "of seeming to thrust myself upon you in this way; but Mrs. Rowe will tell you that I was simply bound to secure a word with her; I should have had to contrive it even if she had been staying at Windsor Castle. And I think we have several friends in common, haven't we? The Duchess of Milford, Lady Shields, I forget who else."

"I am afraid," answered Barbara, who was not in the best of tempers, "that I can't claim acquaintance with the Duchess of Milford or with Lady Shields; but I hope, all the same, that you will let me offer you a cup of tea."

Mrs. Asher was loquaciously grateful, and so sorry that she was obliged to run away. Would Mrs. Vale, if at any time she should happen to be driving in that neighbourhood, care to inspect the Beaulieu orchid-houses? "I am almost always away; but the gardener would be only too delighted to exhibit them to you, and they are really rather beautiful just now." The woman's methods and manners, like Prince Bismarck's diplomacy, lacked refinement; yet they more often than not achieved success.

"Am I," Barbara groaned, as soon as she had rustled off, "called upon to know her after this?"

"You aren't called upon to call upon her, anyhow," George answered.

"But I was asking Angela. What do you think, Angela?"

Mrs. Rowe thought that it was rather a question of expediency than of obligation. "I myself," she remarked, "called upon them long ago, and I don't feel that I have suffered any contamination in consequence. It is true that I am nobody, and also that I have selfish reasons for wishing to conciliate the Ashers."

"Whereas I," observed Barbara, "have none. I don't hunt, and I don't, except under very strong pressure, collect money for charities. No; I decline to be bothered with these vulgar people."

George, on second thoughts, deemed it well to respectfully deprecate this determination. "After all, they are not so very offensive, and the mastership of the hounds can't be left in commission much longer. I expect," he ill-advisedly added, "that Denis would rather like you to show them some civility."

That argument was conclusive. "He is at liberty," Barbara declared, "to be as civil as he likes

to all the tribes of Israel and Judah, but I really cannot see why I should oblige him by throwing myself into their arms. If he has any sense of decency at all—but I doubt whether he has much—he will think that that pushing woman asked for a snub and ought to get one.”

Now this was exactly what Denis Vale did think, and said in so many words when, after a time, he rejoined the trio, fanning himself with a panama hat, and was informed of what had taken place during his absence. For, although he had no particular personal objection to the Ashers, he was the last man in the world to allow his hand to be forced. Even Mrs. Rowe failed, on this occasion, to move him.

“If they were friends of yours, and if you asked my wife to call at Beaulieu because they were your friends, that would be quite another thing,” said he; “but this attempt to force themselves upon us against our will is a sheer piece of impertinence. The only thing to be done is to take no notice of it.”

“And grievously affront Asher?” George hazarded.

“I don’t suppose Mr. Asher sent his wife here this afternoon. If he did, he must have known that he was trying to steal a march, and he has no business to be affronted because the thing hasn’t come off.”

There was some further debate, in which Barbara took no share, but at length she astonished her audience by suddenly declaring that it was too silly to make all that fuss about such a trifle, and that if she could increase Mrs. Asher’s happiness by calling at Beaulieu, she would call.

“I beg,” said Denis somewhat sharply, “that you will do no such thing.”

"Do you forbid me to do it?" she inquired, with a gleam of defiance in her eyes.

Denis immediately became cool and disdainful. "Oh, dear me," he answered, "pray please yourself. I only venture to mention that you won't please me by doing it."

"I shall call upon the woman," said Barbara deliberately. "She is underbred and overdressed; but at least she is in touch with the outer world, which counts for something. It is just possible that she may amuse me."

Thus Mrs. Asher scored a probably important success, not because she was as clever as she fancied herself, but because Denis Vale was a good deal less so than a man of his calmly cynical temperament should have been.

## CHAPTER VIII

### COLD WATER

It came to pass on a sultry afternoon that Dicky Vale and his sister set forth for a walk under the charge of Miss Beamish, the recently engaged nursery governess whom one of them was thought old enough to require. This stout, good-humoured, and rather indolent lady was, in Dicky's opinion, an excellent substitute for the nurse who still exercised authority over Di, but from whose rule he was now, by reason of his more advanced years, in some measure emancipated. He had never been able (although he had very conscientiously and perseveringly tried) to get on the blind side of nurse; but with Miss Beamish he flattered himself that he had found out how to deal. Therefore, having a certain long-cherished scheme in his head, he plodded along until a shady spot upon the outskirts of one of the home coverts had been reached, when he announced in a sad voice that he was dreadfully tired.

"So are you," he sympathetically added, glancing up at his fat duenna; "and oh, you *do* look hot and red!"

Miss Beamish owned with a sigh that the temperature was almost too oppressive for pedestrian exercise.

"We're all tired," Dicky declared, winking at his sister. "Let's sit down, and then you can tell us a story."

Di, a child of slowly moving intelligence, protested that she was not conscious of fatigue, but collapsed when her brother surreptitiously shook his fist at her, and sat upon the sun-warmed grass, placidly sucking her thumb, while the worthy Miss Beamish embarked upon a leisurely narration of the adventures of Jack the Giant-Killer. As a *raconteuse* Miss Beamish possessed conspicuous ability. She could embroider and amplify a given theme for practically any length of time, provided that she did not fall asleep during the process, and not the least of her merits in Dicky's eyes was that she almost invariably did. She soon grew sleepy now, with her broad back against the trunk of a tree and her hands folded on her lap; by degrees her voice became faint and uncertain; finally it ceased altogether, her jaws dropped, and a long, low snore testified to the pleasing fact that she was for the moment a negligible quantity. Then swiftly and silently Dicky rose, holding out a hand to Di, who joined him on tip-toe, and an instant later the two babes had vanished into the wood.

"Where are we going?" Di asked presently in an eager whisper.

"You'll see," answered her senior and her leader; "don't chatter."

With elaborate and somewhat superfluous prudence (but what is the fun of running away if craft and skill be eliminated?) he made a wide circuit through the trees, emerging at length upon the park at a point not very distant from that where Miss Beamish was peacefully slumbering; then he broke into a trot downhill, while the breathless Di, clutching his hand and



realizing now whither they were bound, gasped out gleefully, "The boat! the boat!"

There were water-lilies on the surface of the lake towards which Dicky was heading, and Di, as he knew, had a passion for pulling these which she was sometimes, under adequate supervision, permitted to gratify. She might, therefore, be relied upon as a willing accomplice. Personally he saw no special attraction in water-lilies; but what filled him with unholy joy was the prospect of embarking in the punt and shoving it off into the deep, unaided and alone. For no evil deed within his compass could be more audacious than this, nor had any been more sternly forbidden. Also, he had been assured that the commission of it involved very great danger, and that any little boy who should be wicked enough to attempt it might not improbably pay for his disobedience with his life.

Now, of course the chain by which the punt was secured in the boat-house ought to have been padlocked, and Denis Vale, who in his own childhood had been as nearly as possible drowned through neglect of that obvious precaution, had given orders that it should be taken; but, as a matter of fact, both key and padlock had long ago been mislaid, and thus history repeated itself in so far as that the heir of Southacre was soon afloat, with an unmanageably long and heavy punt-pole in his small hands. Whether precedent would be followed to the extent of his speedily losing his balance and falling headlong into the water, remained to be seen; but to a bystander nothing would have appeared more likely. Meanwhile the voyage promised to prove prolific in adventure; for Di began by clutching at the tough stems of the water-lilies, and was, as a natural consequence, dragged overboard, only to be rescued at the last

moment by her brother, who seized one of her fat legs, but was unable to save her hat. An even more serious loss was that of the punt-pole, which he had been compelled to drop, and which, when it reappeared upon the surface, was floating out of reach. Di whimpered a little, but Dicky rubbed his hands.

"Now you *have* done it!" he chuckled; "we're going to be shipwrecked this time, we are! We can't punt without a pole, and the wind's getting up."

A light breeze had in truth arisen, and wavelets were perceptibly moving the castaways farther and farther from the shore. The opposite bank, to be sure, was not very remote; but between it and them were a couple of small islands, upon one of which it might reasonably be hoped, Dicky thought, that they would be driven. In such an event, he complacently explained, they would not only be cut off from human aid, but would be liable to attack by the swans who dwelt thereon and who were known to be desperately fierce at certain seasons. He was relating how, once upon a time, a keeper had had his leg broken by a blow from the wing of an infuriated swan, and Di had already begun to stuff her fists into her eyes, when piercing cries from the margin of the lake rent the air.

"Come back! come back, you wicked children!" shrieked the affrighted Miss Beamish, whom an instinctive foreboding had brought upon the scene. "How dare you play such tricks! Come back this moment."

"We can't come back," bawled out Dicky in reply; "we've lost the punt-pole. Oh, what fun!"

An animated parley followed, which was productive of much amusement to Dicky and something like despair to poor Miss Beamish, who paced to and fro,

wringing her hands impotently and ejaculating at intervals, "Oh, what *will* Mrs. Vale say!" It was indeed only too evident that the children could not return, nor could she by any means reach them. If at least that little imp would but sit still until somebody came! Naturally, however, on being adjured to do this, he began dancing about, and if his craft had not, by the mercy of Heaven, been a flat-bottomed one, he would assuredly have contrived to swamp it.

"Sit down, sir, sit down!" shouted Miss Beamish, in what she meant to be a terrible voice. "If you do not sit down I will ask your papa to whip you—I will indeed!"

"He'll have to catch me first. Hooray!" roared Dicky, dancing with enhanced vigour.

He could not upset the punt; but he could—and, alas! he did—end by upsetting himself. Over he went backwards, with his legs in the air, and the splash of his immersion was succeeded by that of Miss Beamish, who—with what object she would perhaps have been puzzled to explain—plunged into the water up to her waist and screamed piteously for help.

Help, little though she dared to expect it, was at hand. Denis, strolling across the park, had witnessed the catastrophe, had torn off his coat and boots, and was swimming out with swift strokes towards the punt before she had realized his opportune advent. The distance was nothing, and very little time had been lost, yet the child, struggling wildly, had sunk twice ere his father reached him. It was touch and go even then; for the bottom of the lake, as Denis knew, was overgrown with clinging weeds, and the capacities of a moderate swimmer, encumbered by saturated clothes, are soon exhausted.

It appeared, however, that Dicky Vale had not

been born to be drowned. Five minutes later he returned from temporary unconsciousness to a world of sorrow and dire immediate discomfort. He was lying upon his back on the grass, with two dripping persons bending over him; he was aware of having been roughly shaken; he felt horribly cold and sick, and he heard, as from a distance, his father's voice saying:

"There's no harm done; he'll soon get rid of all the muddy water he has swallowed. That may be unpleasant for you, but I'm afraid you must bear it. Drive him home in the carriage and get him into a warm bed as quickly as you can, while I go and fetch the other derelict."

This injunction was addressed to a beautifully attired lady who was sobbing distractedly hard by. On her way back from Beaulieu, where she had left cards, Barbara had been startled by the spectacle of Miss Beamish splashing about in the lake like a sportive hippopotamus, had stopped her victoria, and had arrived on foot just in time to assist at the conclusion of a dramatic episode. Her agitation on beholding the seemingly lifeless body of her only son was pardonable; but she gathered from Denis's impatient tone and frowning brow that she would not be pardoned if she allowed it to interfere with prompt obedience to orders; so, after the manner of women under such exceptional circumstances, she silently and submissively did as she was told.

Di, meanwhile, in an isolation which she felt to be entirely devoid of splendour, had given herself up for lost. Dicky was beyond question dead. Papa and mamma had evidently forgotten her, Miss Beamish turned a deaf ear to her howls, and every instant was bringing her nearer to that dread islet upon which

she was doubtless destined to perish miserably by the wings and bills of ferocious swans. It was therefore with no small relief that she saw her father swimming once more in her direction and pushing the floating punt-pole before him. Presently he scrambled in alongside of her, and comforted her with assurances that she was all right and that Dicky was all right; after which, in response to timid inquiries, he made the gratifying announcement that nobody was going to be punished this time.

"If that young villain had been a year or two older, I should have had to whop him; as it is, the ends of justice may be looked upon as having been met by his ducking and his fright."

Similar clemency was shown to the woebegone Miss Beamish, who had expected nothing short of instant dismissal, and who penitently avowed that that was what she merited.

"I haven't a word to say for myself, Mr. Vale," she declared, when Denis and his charge disembarked; "I fell asleep and they ran away from me; that was how it happened. Of course nothing can excuse such carelessness, and it makes matters no better to say that I trusted them."

"Not much," Denis agreed, smiling; "a very safe rule of conduct in this delightful world is to trust nobody, you will find. At the same time, my sympathies are with you, Miss Beamish; for I have made the same amiably foolish mistake myself in my day. Don't be distressed; but go home and change your clothes, and we will say no more about it. Only please remember for the future that we were altogether shapen in wickedness, all of us, and that if the cat closes her eyes for a moment the mice are pretty sure to play the deuce."

He started off at a trot towards the house to change his own clothes. He was, for the time being, in a good humour, as everybody who has just performed a successful bit of work must needs be; but his spirits began to flag once more as soon as he was in his dressing-room. Was it, after all, worth while to have saved the boy's life, he wondered; would not he himself have been spared infinite worry, distress, and humiliation had he not been pulled out of that same lake by officious persons at an early stage in his career? Existence even under the most favourable conditions is but a dubious boon, marred by petty cares, trivial discomforts, perpetual disappointments; while, if the conditions be unfavourable (as in the majority of cases of course they are), it degenerates into a downright burden. Whom the gods love die young: truer words were never spoken. One cannot, to be sure, knock one's offspring on the head from motives of sheer benevolence; but it is almost a pity, for their sake, that one can't.

His pessimistic reflections were interrupted here by a knock at the door, in reply to which he called out, "Who is it? What do you want?"

"It's only me," a meek and tremulous voice announced from without; "could I speak to you for a moment?"

Now, Denis knew very well what that meant, and he hardened his heart. Barbara, urged by impulse and emotion, had come to express her gratitude, her admiration, her qualified affection—perhaps even, in an outburst of false sentiment, to offer forgiveness to one who had not the most remote intention of ever forgiving her. Therefore he made curt answer:

"No, you couldn't; I'm changing. I'll go down into the library as soon as I'm ready, if that will do."

It was intimated to him that that would do, and he resumed his toilet without hurrying himself. Something in the nature of a scene was, he perceived, unavoidable; but he resolved that it should be neither a long nor a harrowing one. Before keeping the appointment that he had made, he paid a visit to Dicky, whom he found sitting up in bed with an open Bible upon his knees, and who mentioned in subdued accents that he had been advised to study sundry passages in Holy Writ which seemed to bear upon his case.

"I daresay that is all right," Denis returned; "but what I should like you to bear in mind, my boy, is that you won't get off so cheaply a second time. I am not going to whip you now, because this is your first serious offence and because you have been half-drowned. Break rules again, though, and you'll get no mercy, so you needn't expect any. Do you see?"

Dicky announced with conviction that he meant to be good from that time forth for evermore; whereupon his father went downstairs, laughing, to tackle another and a probably less sincere penitent.

Barbara was, in truth, both penitent and sincere; yet it must be confessed that she was not happy in her efforts to persuade a sceptical man that she was either. She had had a great nervous shock; her husband's courage and presence of mind had impressed her; she was willing to own that she had behaved badly and to welcome what she conceived to be her due—an admission that she herself had been harshly and unjustly treated. But she went quite the wrong way to work when she threw herself incontinently into unresponsive arms and murmured, "Denis, can't we let bygones be bygones?"

"I may be very dull-witted," Denis returned, dis-

engaging himself, "but really I know of no reason why we should."

"It is so miserable going on as we have been doing lately!" Barbara pleaded.

"It isn't exactly enjoyable; but there is no other possible way of going on that I can suggest. The situation, let me remind you, is not one of my creating."

"But it is of your creating, Denis. You assume that I am utterly selfish and wicked; you won't believe that I care at all for you or the children; you make no allowance whatever for me."

"Except a pecuniary one, which I would increase if there were the slightest use in increasing it," assented her husband, quite unmoved. "I am afraid you will have to rest satisfied with that. You are in a melting mood just now because of Dicky's having tumbled into the lake, and I shouldn't wonder if you regarded me as a sort of cheap hero for having fished him out, although nothing was easier or less perilous. All this may be very pretty and very touching, but it doesn't, unfortunately, abolish certain hard facts."

"It is you who are hard!" Barbara cried; "the facts, if you only knew them, are not at all what you choose to take it for granted that they must be."

"My dear Barbara, I saw what I saw."

"Yes, and I acknowledged at once that I had done wrong; you can't have forgotten my acknowledging it. If you wish me to beg your pardon, I will beg your pardon. Can I say more?"

"Really," answered Denis, with a short laugh, "I doubt whether you can."

"Ah, you doubt me altogether and in everything. You are so eager to condemn me that you refuse me so much as a hearing."



"We will save time and discussion by putting it like that, if you choose. I certainly don't believe in your power to excuse or explain away an incident which could have only one meaning. Your position is a humiliating one, I grant you, though scarcely as humiliating as mine; but there is absolutely no help for it, nor any good, that I can see, in talking about it."

"You are the most unjust, the most self-satisfied, and quite—*quite* the most selfish person I have ever met in all my life!" exclaimed Barbara, suddenly losing her temper. "I wanted to make friends; I wanted to be forgiven and to forgive you—because I *have* something to forgive, whatever you may think—but I will never try again—never."

"I am glad of that," answered Denis composedly; "for such attempts are bound to fail, and they only give rise to undignified recriminations."

Barbara whirled out of the room, leaving him to shrug his shoulders despondently. But he did not reproach himself; it seemed to him as clear as daylight that nobody but a born fool could have met her advances otherwise than as he had done.

## CHAPTER IX

### A WIGGING

FROM time to time Lady Mount-Sorrel took it into her head, or affected to do so, that she was about to die. She was a remarkably hale and healthy old woman, who, save for an occasional slight attack of rheumatism or bronchitis, never had an ache or a pain from year's end to year's end; still, at her advanced age, the average expectation of life is, according to insurance companies, demonstrable in small figures, and the most trifling indisposition led her to prepare herself and others for the end. This she commonly did by summoning a number of her relatives whose edification, she thought, would be promoted by the spectacle of a Christian death-bed, and her commands were always obeyed; for she was very rich, and might obviously live to make alterations in her will. It must, however, be said that this latter incentive did not weigh with Barbara Vale, who went to Mount-Sorrel, when commanded, for the simple and sufficient reason that she was too much in awe of her grandmother to refuse.

She did not, therefore, dream of disregarding an epistolary behest which reached her a few days after the misadventure recorded in the last chapter. Lady Mount-Sorrel wrote (in a firm hand) that she believed her dissolution to be imminent, and that she wished,

while still in possession of her faculties, to take leave of those to whom she was united by earthly ties. The doctors, it was true, did not consider her in what they were pleased to call danger; but she might say without presumption that she knew a good deal more about her own physical state than any doctor, and she felt that strength was slowly but surely abandoning her. Accordingly, she must request that Barbara and her husband would be so kind as to drive over within twenty-four hours and make their arrangements for a week's stay. If at the end of a week the anticipated bereavement had not befallen them, that would doubtless be a sign that Providence had still some work in the world left for a weary old woman to do.

"I suppose," reflected Barbara ruefully, "what she means is that she intends hauling me over the coals for some imaginary offence or other. Imaginary it must be; for goodness knows I haven't been allowed a chance of offending anybody, except Denis, this year."

Denis was not offended—what made him so odious was that nothing caused him to take offence now—when he was told what was expected of him; but he declined without hesitation to accompany his wife on her pious mission.

"If I am really wanted, I can be sent for at any moment," he observed; "I have too many jobs on hand just now to kick my heels in illness at Mount-Sorrel for a week unnecessarily. You can remind your grandmother, with my love, that she has called 'Wolf!' quite half a dozen times already."

"I think I see myself delivering that message!" returned Barbara, laughing.

There were moments when she almost forgot that she was at daggers drawn with her husband, and

reverted instinctively to the familiar good-humour of days gone by; it was not in her nature to be vindictive; with her, wrath was a *brevis furor* which soon flickered out in the absence of fresh fuel.

"Of course," she went on, "there is nothing the matter with granny, and I am no more wanted at Mount-Sorrel than you are; but I shall have to go, all the same—and get a wiggling for my pains, most likely. I wonder what I am supposed to have done this time?"

"I can't think," said Denis dryly; "your conscience, I am sure, must be clear."

A swift shock of alarm banished the smile from his wife's face. "You haven't," she ejaculated, aghast, "told granny about—about Ernest Glyn! You can't have been such a brute as that!"

"It is possible," answered Denis, with cold contempt, "that I might be enough of a brute to put you in the pillory; but it is quite impossible for me, I assure you, to be such a fool. I haven't swallowed what I have swallowed to take Lady Mount-Sorrel or anybody else into my confidence. Don't you understand that, for obvious reasons, you will never be betrayed by me?"

"I understand," Barbara reluctantly admitted, "that you wish, in your queer, distorted way, to be generous as well as just."

"You flatter me; I am not aware of wishing to be anything except moderately safe and moderately reputable. You, if one may judge by your usual behaviour, are not overwhelmingly anxious to be either; and yet it is of some consequence to you to be both. I should advise you to receive your grandmother's rebukes and questions in silence—or, at all events, not to make a truthful reply to them."

"Do you mean that she has been put on the scent by Angela Rowe or Mr. Hallett?"

"It doesn't seem unlikely; and you will have nobody but yourself to thank if she has. Anyhow, it is as well for me not to accompany you; because, as you may have noticed, I am a poor hand at telling lies when I am driven into a corner."

Without being (as was so obligingly implied) an adept in the art of deception, Barbara did recognise how desirable it was, in the interest of her personal peace and comfort, to prevent Lady Mount-Sorrel from intervening between her and her irreconcilable husband; so she dispensed not unwillingly with the latter's escort. Having ordered the carriage and given instructions to her maid, she presently strolled down to the village to despatch a telegram to Mount-Sorrel; the result of which somewhat unusual pedestrian effort was that on the threshold of the combined post-office and grocer's shop she encountered a swarthy gentleman, who took off his hat to her.

"Allow me to introduce myself, Mrs. Vale," said Mr. Asher, with a smile vaguely, undefinably impertinent. "My wife was awfully sorry to miss you when you called at our place the other day."

Barbara gave murmured utterance to some reciprocal conventional regret and stood aside to let him pass, but it appeared that he was not in a hurry. He remarked that Mrs. Asher and he were very glad to be at last on visiting terms with their neighbours at Southacre, and that it was a funny thing his having never until now had the pleasure of making Mrs. Vale's acquaintance. "Your husband and I, as you know, have been pals in the hunting-field for several seasons past."

"My husband meets a great many people out

hunting," answered Barbara, wondering what on earth the man meant by his familiar tone and by the bold stare of his black eyes.

Possibly he meant nothing offensive—although he certainly looked as if he did—for he only rejoined, with a slight upward jerk of his shoulders, that he quite understood what a great gulf yawned in Trentshire between hunting and visiting acquaintances. Nevertheless, he hoped that the good people round about were now going to be a little more friendly than they had hitherto shown themselves, and he was grateful to Mrs. Vale for giving them a lead.

"Oh, I don't pretend to lead the county," Barbara, rather unwisely, declared; "that is my grandmother's prerogative."

She had said exactly what Mr. Asher wanted her to say, and he promptly took advantage of the opening afforded to him.

"Ah, just so! And I count upon you—I may count upon you, may I not, Mrs. Vale?—to use your influence with Lady Mount-Sorrel in our favour. I need scarcely tell you that in the ordinary course of things Trentshire society would be nothing to us; we have our own friends, and if it were not for the hunting, I don't suppose we should spend much time or money in these parts. But you will have heard from your husband that I have been requested to spend a good deal of both here for the future; which, naturally, makes a difference."

Barbara, in reply, was afraid that she could not boast of possessing any influence with Lady Mount-Sorrel. She had no doubt, however, that the hunting people—she herself did not hunt, and was not particularly interested in the question of the mastership

—would exert themselves to comply with Mr. and Mrs. Asher's wishes.

"I'm not so sure of that, do you know," Mr. Asher returned candidly. "My experience is that if you want people to exert themselves for you to any practical extent, you must make it worth their while, or else know how to frighten them—the latter, perhaps, for choice. It so happens, too, that some of those who have been most civil to us, such as the Glyns, for instance, are like you—they don't hunt. A great pity, I always think, that Ernest Glyn doesn't care about hunting, for he is a nice young fellow in other ways, and rather a friend of mine. Rather a friend of yours also, isn't he?"

That the man meant to be impertinent was now beyond question, and his tactics, if wanting in delicacy, had the merit of being effective. For Barbara was not only frightened, but, what was worse, showed that she was so. Subsequently she realized, with belated self-reproach, how very silly this had been of her, and that Mr. Asher, however unamiable his intentions might be, could know no more than scores of others knew. At the moment, however, she unfortunately lost her head, and before she knew where she was she was committed to bringing pressure to bear upon Lady Mount-Sorrel. She had been threatened with nothing, she had nothing to fear; yet such is the force of a guilty conscience that she capitulated, and by capitulating virtually made the most deplorable admissions. Nor was Mr. Asher the man to let her down easily.

"Sending off a wire?" he asked, after thanking her. "Always best to do that with one's own hand, isn't it? Servants aren't to be trusted—especially not with foreign telegrams, which want to be clearly

written. I had to despatch one to South America the other day, and, if you'll believe me, those duffers made me repeat it twice. They said they couldn't make head or tail of it. As if anybody but the addressee was intended to make head or tail of it!" And although Mr. Asher did not actually wink, he had the air of repressing with difficulty that familiar and impudent signal.

Barbara committed the further imprudence of declaring, with needless vehemence, that she had no telegram to transmit to that part of the world, and the interview terminated. On the homeward way she had leisure, as has been mentioned, to take herself to task and repent; likewise she anathematized the Hebrew race in general and Reuben Asher in particular. "I shall have to talk granny over, though, for all that," she sighed; "that vulgar wretch may only have had suspicions before, but he must be certain now, and I could see by his face that, as an enemy, he would stick at nothing. One small consolation is that if I can inveigle granny into calling at Beaulieu, I shall make Denis feel pretty sick."

Scant probability was there of Lady Mount-Sorrel's being cajoled into doing anything which did not commend itself to her own approval, and it so chanced that upon no single point was she likely to prove less amenable at that juncture than upon the one which her grand-daughter had in mind. Barbara, later in the day, found her sitting up in bed, with works of devotion scattered broadcast upon the satin quilt which covered her knees. She announced that her illness had taken a slight turn for the better, but that she was still very feeble, and quite unequal to the effort of sustained dialogue. That she was, nevertheless, strong enough to administer a severe rebuke to



one who deserved it, was doubtless only evidence of her indomitable will and resolution to do her duty, at no matter what personal sacrifice. Barbara had been scolded for some time before she discovered, with much relief, that the offence of which she had been guilty was not, after all, what she had imagined it to be. Where she had grievously erred, it seemed, was in taking upon herself to visit Mrs. Asher without previously consulting her elders.

"Don't tell me," Lady Mount-Sorrel sternly warned her, "that your husband approved of such an escapade. Denis Vale is not a wise man, and he has treated you from the first with an indulgence which I, for one, have never thought prudent; but I will say for him that he knows what is proper and fitting in others, if he does not always apply his knowledge to his own actions."

"Well, he didn't forbid me to call at Beaulieu, anyhow," returned Barbara; "he told me to please myself about it."

"In other words, you insisted, and he gave in, against his better judgment. Just what I conjectured. Perhaps that accounts for his rather unfeeling refusal to come here with you. Or did he pretend to be sceptical about my condition?"

"He didn't pretend," answered Barbara, not sorry to divert the current of her grandmother's displeasure; "he was quite honestly sceptical. So must Uncle John be, I presume, for I hear that he is away."

The old lady snorted. "Your uncle," said she, "was assured, this morning, that there was no immediate danger, otherwise he would not have gone to Blackhampton to lecture before the British Association, in fulfilment of a long-standing promise. The multiplicity of solar systems and inhabited planets is

his subject, I believe. Very presumptuous and unsettling to people's minds, by my way of thinking; although he declares that such speculations conflict in no degree with acceptance of revealed religion. How he accounts for the first chapter of Genesis and the tenth of Joshua I can't imagine. I fear he is content to leave them unaccounted for, after the modern deplorably cowardly fashion, which is winked at by bishops and archbishops, and will end by turning us into a nation of infidels. But all this has nothing to do with what we were talking about. You have done an extremely silly thing, Barbara, by calling upon those *parvenus* at the Red House, and you will find that you cannot afford to take the lead like that. Nobody, you may depend upon it, will follow your example."

"Other people have called upon them," Barbara pleaded; "the Glyns have called, and so has Angela Rowe."

"Angela Rowe would call upon the Prince of Darkness if it suited him to build a house near her; she means well, but she has no sense of responsibility, and indeed she has only herself to consider. As for Helen Glyn, her object probably was to annoy me—a most reprehensible and unwise motive, I must say. She knows just as well as you do that she cannot force these Jews upon the county without my consent."

"Of course," Barbara meekly and diplomatically agreed, "we all know that; but why shouldn't you consent, granny?"

"That, my dear, is not the question: the question is, why should I?"

The answer, so far as Barbara was concerned, was, "Because I am afraid that, unless you do, that un-

scrupulous man will do his best to take away my character ;” but, naturally, she put forward other and less startling arguments. The necessity of discovering a well-to-do master for the North Trent Hunt was first urged, to which Lady Mount-Sorrel replied that she knew all about that pretext and did not regard it as conclusive. It was then deferentially suggested that the precepts of Christianity forbid us to despise our fellow-creatures, and this made her ladyship very angry.

“Don’t you be flippant and profane, Barbara,” she retorted sharply ; “don’t presume to teach me my duty as a very humble but consistent Christian, if you please, or I may have to bring you to a sense of yours by telling your husband who paid your last dressmaker’s bill.”

“He wouldn’t care,” Barbara interpolated.

“Oh yes, he would, my dear ; he would insist upon repaying me, and then he would make himself very disagreeable to you. Quite properly, too. As for differences in earthly station, they exist by the express will of Heaven, and are not to be done away with on frivolous grounds. I may or I may not think it right, after a time, to recognise newcomers of dubious antecedents ; but no living being shall force me into doing so, old and frail though I am. Not the bishop, not Helen Glyn, not Angela Rowe, and most assuredly not you.”

This was the reverse of encouraging, and Barbara, who was apt to be easily discouraged, soon abandoned the unequal contest. When all was said, it was unlikely that Mr. Asher could do her any serious injury ; and one comfort, at all events, was that her redoubtable grandmother did not know as much as Mr. Asher apparently did.

Lady Mount-Sorrel, as a matter of fact, knew many more things than she was supposed to know. A very large correspondence, a gently imperious habit of putting direct queries, and a bright set of wits kept her pretty accurately informed with regard to all matters which concerned her, besides a considerable number which did not; and she had not, on this occasion, ordered Barbara's attendance only in order to rebuke her for having so audaciously assumed the initiative in a local and social sense. She knew, moreover, enough of human nature to deal warily with one who was both timid and perverse; so that she avoided the error of asking her grand-daughter point-blank what was the meaning of certain disquieting reports which had reached Mount-Sorrel. Thus she contrived, one nightfall, to elicit such information as seemed requisite for her guidance. Barbara was, without much difficulty, induced to expatiate upon Denis's selfishness, harshness, and utter want of consideration for others; the grievance of enforced exile from civilized society was set forth at full length; and the impossibility of hitting it off with a man who appeared incapable of ever acknowledging himself in the wrong was tearfully deplored. There was not, Lady Mount-Sorrel gathered, much more than that amiss, although something more and something worse might soon arise, unless measures were taken to reconcile a pair of geese. On the following day, accordingly (after eight hours of undisturbed slumber), she took a preliminary measure by sending for her son, whose return from Blackhampton and the pursuit of science had been announced to her.

"I want you," said she, as soon as she had made hasty response to dutiful inquiries respecting her health, "to send a groom over to Southacre with a

note for Denis Vale. I have a word or two to say to him."

"A note from you?" asked Lord Mount-Sorrel.  
"Oh, certainly."

"No; a note from you, please. He won't, I am sorry to say, come when I call him. He is one of the few people," added her ladyship pensively, "who won't, and I can't quite make out why. However, there it is."

"If he won't come for you, he is not likely to come for me," objected Lord Mount-Sorrel. "Why do you want him?"

"I should despair of being able to make you understand; but there is, fortunately, no need for you to understand. Just write him a line and say something that will bring him. You can say, if you like, that I am going to die—which is strictly true. Or, perhaps, on second thoughts, you had better say nothing, except that he will do you a particular favour by spending one night here and taking Barbara away with him the next day. He can't very well refuse an undefined request like that."

He neither refused nor accepted immediately, for the groom returned from Southacre to announce that Mr. Vale had left for London, but that his lordship's note had been forwarded. And from London, on the morrow, came a telegram: "Sorry; detained here on business. Will be with you Monday or Tuesday next, if that will do."

"Well, all one can say is that it will have to do," muttered Lady Mount-Sorrel, not best pleased, when the above despatch was shown to her. "Business in London at this time of year! H'm! I shall let him off the less easily when he does come; that's all."

## CHAPTER X

### DENIS DECLINES INTERVENTION

DENIS VALE had no difficulty in guessing why his presence at Mount-Sorrel was solicited. That his wife's uncle could have anything of importance to say to him was scarcely within the bounds of possibility; but nothing was more likely than that the old lady smelt a rat. Well, that was a state of affairs which had been certain to present itself sooner or later, and perhaps it was as well to face an unavoidable interview at once and have done with it. Unlike the rest of the world, he was not afraid of Lady Mount-Sorrel, nor did he doubt his capacity for politely relegating her to the study of her own business.

He arrived from London on the afternoon of the day he had named, and was received by his host, who frankly and unhesitatingly avowed a detached attitude.

"Always delighted to see you, Vale," Lord Mount-Sorrel declared; "but I may say, to save time, that I have no special reason for wishing to see you just now. I believe—though I am not in a position to speak positively—that my mother has. If so, she will no doubt let you hear of it."

"No doubt she will," Denis agreed. "I quite understood that the message was hers, not yours. I

hope she is in a less alarming condition of health than she was."

"Health?" returned Lord Mount-Sorrel vaguely. "Yes, to be sure—now that you mention it—she is supposed to be unwell, and she still takes her meals in her bed-room; but Barbara tells me that she had giblet soup at dinner last night and broiled kidneys for her breakfast this morning. So I leave you to imagine."

"I can easily imagine what would happen to me if I were to lie in bed and adopt that sort of diet. Such a digestion ought to imply a correspondingly serene temper. Does it?"

"Ah, that I can't say—don't know, I'm sure," answered Lord Mount-Sorrel, who was evidently anxious to keep clear of entanglements; "you had better ask Barbara," he added, plucking nervously at his beard. "I shouldn't wonder if there had been some—er—er—slight discussions and differences; you know what women are when they get together and when there isn't very much for them to do. But I have no authority for saying so; I make it a rule only to know what I am told about domestic affairs, and to forget as much of that as I can."

Barbara, without waiting to be asked, was far more communicative. The welcome which she presently accorded to her unresponsive husband was the measure of the affliction and boredom which she had undergone for the best part of a week.

"I literally jumped for joy when they told me that you had arrived," she ejaculated. "Never before in all my born days have I put in such a time. There hasn't been a soul in the house, and I have been made to read good books aloud to granny from morning to night, except when she stopped me to

take up her own parable and preach my head off. Now, I hope and trust she will let fly at you, and then we can bolt in confusion, like Adam and Eve out of Paradise."

Denis had some ado to repress the laugh provoked by this bold parallel. Occasionally, and in a limited degree, he shared his wife's disposition to forget the insurmountable barrier which separated them; every now and then her evident sense of cheerful irresponsibility infected him, and he wondered whether it was, after all, worth while to treat the sins of so frivolous a mortal tragically. It would not have been worth while, had he despised her as thoroughly as he thought he did, nor (since he had quite made up his mind to inflict no outward and visible punishment upon her) was it for his own comfort to refuse the species of truce which seemed to be offered to him. But he was proud and he was sore: his own comfort was not what he felt inclined to study; much less did he deem it incumbent upon him to promote hers. Therefore he made curt reply:

"You can't afford to quarrel with your grandmother. Probably you realize that, though."

"I haven't quarrelled with her," Barbara protested. "There has been no end of fuss because I ventured to call upon the Ashers without asking leave, and I have intimated that I am sorry—though I'm not. What more could I say or do? It hasn't been suggested that I should drive over to Beau-lieu and request the butler to return me my cards."

Denis did not pursue the subject. If Barbara had neither said nor done more than she avowed, well and good; but he thought it unlikely that the discussions and differences of which he had been informed



had related to that cause of offence alone, and his suspicions were confirmed when Lady Mount-Sorrel, who invited him to visit her in her bed-room soon after dinner, began by stating that nothing, in her opinion, was more unwise or more indefensible than an attempt to interfere between husband and wife.

"That, I presume," observed Denis grimly, "is as much as to say that you propose to make the attempt."

Lady Mount-Sorrel said, "Not at all. My view is St. Paul's—that wives should be subject to their husbands, and during my own married life I always acted upon that view."

"Indeed?" said Denis, who had been under a different impression.

"Yes. Wives, nevertheless, have their rights, you must remember, and husbands have certain clear duties to perform."

"Has Barbara been complaining that I have neglected mine?"

"Now, my dear man," returned Lady Mount-Sorrel, suddenly altering the pitch of her voice, and, as it were, clearing decks for action, "there is no use at all in your scowling and drawing yourself up like that; for I really am not to be intimidated. No, Barbara has not, strictly speaking, made any complaint to me; but I have found out enough from her to see that you are adopting an altogether mistaken line of conduct. Of course she has not told me the whole truth; I can well believe that the grievances are not all on her side. Yet the fact remains that she is your wife and the mother of your children: you can't get away from that, mind."

"When I try to get away from it," answered Denis, "I shall be prepared to listen to exhortations from

you or any other well-meaning and partially informed person."

"Oh, but I am afraid you are trying; and the thing, believe me, can't be done with safety to yourself or to her. I am well aware that nowadays, owing to the disgraceful divorce acts and other causes, marriage has come to be regarded much more lightly than it was in my youth, and I will admit, if you like, that in the case of irreligious persons, such as you and Barbara, the modern system may appear sometimes to work smoothly; but then mutual indifference is indispensable. Otherwise the most shocking and painful consequences are apt to follow."

Denis laughed. "Don't be alarmed," said he; "there will be no scandal in the county or in your family, if I can help it. I myself dislike scandals. I am sorry you should have discovered that Barbara and I don't get on together; but, as you have made the discovery, you have made it. You won't, I hope, expect me to go into details."

But that, naturally, was just what Lady Mount-Sorrel did expect, and she resumed the bland tone which she had temporarily discarded to point out how essential it was that he should oblige her.

"You yourself say that I am partially informed. Very well; let me be fully informed, and I shall then know what steps to take."

"Does it not occur to you that I may object to your taking any steps?"

"When my own grandchild's happiness is at stake!"

"I doubt whether her happiness is at stake, and I doubt still more whether you could do anything to increase it, if it were. Let us understand one another, Lady Mount-Sorrel. I intend to manage my own

affairs in my own way: I am not going to tell you exactly what is the matter, and Barbara, I am sure, won't; but you may take it from me that we shall adopt what you call the modern system. You ought to be thankful, as I am, that there is a modern system which can be adopted without exciting much comment, and which, so far as one may venture to prophesy, won't produce consequences of a nature to pain or shock you."

The old lady, for once in her life, got the worst of the ensuing argument. Her curiosity was not gratified, nor, despite clever strategy, was she able to draw her adversary from an impregnable position. He did not blame his wife, he did not confess himself to blame; he simply declined the good offices of an intermediary, and asserted his undeniable right to deal as he might deem best with domestic difficulties. Lady Mount-Sorrel was fain at length to make her retreat under a show of voluntary withdrawal.

"Well, well," said she tolerantly, "you have revealed all you thought you were concealing, and I have no more to say. It is very evident to me now that you are as angry with your wife—I was half afraid you were not—as she is with you; so I may safely leave you to fight it out. Everybody knows how quarrels of that description always end, silly and even a little dangerous though they may be while they last."

Denis was not angry with his wife; but he thought her rather foolish, and he expressed that opinion while driving in her company, on the morrow, towards Brayton Lodge, where, as he had been informed, she proposed to show herself at a garden-party on her way home.

"If I were you," said he, "I wouldn't pretend

to have grievances, and I wouldn't excite your grandmother to worry secrets out of you. She is as pertacious as a fox-terrier, and, if you don't mind what you are about, she will hit upon the truth presently. Which would scarcely suit you, I imagine."

"Anything," exclaimed Barbara, whose nerves had been set on edge by a valedictory homily from Lady Mount-Sorrel, "would suit me better than the dog's life to which you seem determined to condemn me. I don't care what granny may discover, and I don't care the least little bit what you think of me. The one thing that I really *cannot* endure is having to live in the house with a person who considers it due to himself to be always rude and contemptuous. You can turn me out of your house, if you choose—why don't you? But if it is necessary, as you have apparently decided that it is, for us to go on living together, surely it can't be necessary to remind me every moment how much you hate and despise me. Really, I am in no great danger of forgetting it."

Denis shrugged his shoulders. "I am not conscious of having acted in the way that you describe," he answered; "I thought, on the contrary, that I had been doing what was possible to keep the peace. Still, I must admit that our existence of late has not been ideal, and that, amongst other reasons, is why I have just concluded arrangements to join a shooting expedition to Somaliland. I shall be away for several months, you will be glad to hear."

Barbara turned white and remained silent for a minute, with tightly compressed lips. But it was with no hint of emotion in her voice that she presently remarked, "So that was your London business! Isn't it to Somaliland that people go to shoot lions?"

"Yes, and panthers and rhinos and other wild

beasts. Oh, there are possibilities; although I can't conscientiously advise you to count upon them. The danger, I am told, has been reduced to a minimum, and the climate is remarkably healthy; so I am much more likely, upon the whole, to return home safe and sound than I should be from a point-to-point race. It will give us both a holiday, though."

"How pleasantly and prettily you put things! Well, I am very glad you are going, and I hope you will enjoy your holiday. I am to spend the whole of mine at Southacre, I suppose."

"Not unless you wish. I shall probably save money by absenting myself at an expensive season of the year and selling a few superfluous houses; so there will be no need for you to economize."

"You are indeed generous and accommodating. I suppose you wouldn't mind my running out to Monte Carlo, for instance, during the cold weather, then?"

"I mind nothing—why should I?—that stops short of affronting public prejudice. Monte Carlo has a somewhat rakish sound, but many people of the highest respectability go there for the sake of the music—or say they do. All I stipulate for is a certain amount of deference to Mrs. Grundy."

"Ah, yes; that is all you care about."

"Of course that is what I care about. Doesn't it strike you that my conduct would be supremely absurd and unmeaning if I didn't think that worth caring about? Am I not about to attend this garden-party with you for the express purpose of deluding our neighbours into the belief that we are still an attached couple?"

"Oh, you are going to attend Angela's garden-party, are you? I didn't know that you were, and I should certainly never have guessed your noble motive

if you hadn't told me of it. Let us hope that you may meet with the reward which you so well deserve."

It would perhaps have been more prudent on his part to disguise his aim; yet Barbara, with every desire to behave foolishly, could scarcely frustrate it. Under the eyes of more than half Trentshire Mr. and Mrs. Vale made their joint entry upon a broad lawn where croquet and lawn-tennis were being played by the younger representatives of the county, and, as Denis's detestation of such gatherings was notorious, the mere fact of his seeing fit to patronize one of them sufficed to deal a heavy blow at sundry current rumours.

"My amazement is too much for my manners!" his hostess exclaimed, laughing, while she shook hands with him. "To what do I owe this unheard-of honour?"

"To your irresistible attraction, of course," he answered.

"It is so irresistible," Barbara made haste to explain, "that he is about to fly the country, lest it should lead him into even more compromising demonstrations. He would brave any imaginable peril rather than be compromised, he says. Shows all the lamentable difference that there is between him and me, doesn't it?"

Denis did not wait for the end of a colloquy which opened so ominously. He strolled about amongst his acquaintances, exerting himself more than usual to be agreeable to them and taking care to inform them all of his impending expedition to Somaliland. The chance, he said, had presented itself; it had been really too good a one to miss, and he had obtained his wife's consent. Some of those whom he thus craftily and gratuitously reassured appeared to believe him and to think that it was all right; others had the air

of politely surmising that there might be rather more in it than met the eye. But at least he did what in him lay to perform what he conceived to be his duty. That the estrangement between him and his wife could be kept permanently secret was doubtless too much to hope for; the cause thereof, however, need not be blazoned abroad, unless Barbara should be senseless enough to proclaim it.

Barbara at given moments was senseless enough to proclaim anything. He realized that when he wandered off, after a time, and sat down upon a grassy bank in a sequestered corner of the Brayton Lodge grounds. He also realized, with just a faint touch of compunction, that he was trying her rather highly by abandoning her for a prolonged period to her own devices. Yet—hang it all!—was it his business to act as her guardian angel? Towards his children he was bound, no doubt, to assume that part in some degree; but the woman who, for their sake, must continue to bear his name and eat his bread was entitled to no fostering protection from him. Nor, for the matter of that, did she require any. She was fond of saying reckless things; she was not much more addicted than the modern fine ladies whom she had taken for models to doing them. She knew on which side her bread was buttered, and she had had—she must have had—something of a fright. Oh, she would run away with nobody; she would cling to the position which she had, strictly speaking, forfeited; she would be found more or less respectably occupying it three months, or six months, or any number of months hence.

These things Denis said to himself in the bitterness of his soul because he was by nature and principle a just man, and because his proposed desertion at a

ticklish juncture stood in need of justification; but he had no idea of being put upon his defence by Angela Rowe, who presently sought him out in order to claim one of the privileges of an old and attached friend.

"I don't care whether I am snubbed or not," she declared, after avowing her errand and essaying some futile entreaties; "you shall be warned by me, if by nobody else, that you are acting just about as foolishly as it is possible to act."

"I am not at all surprised at your saying so," Denis tranquilly returned. "To bolt to East Africa in quest of sport, leaving a pretty young wife to amuse herself as best she may for an indefinite length of time, is what every kind and sensible friend would pronounce foolish; yet kindness and common sense might suggest the reflection that one doesn't do that sort of thing without having weighed the pros and cons."

"Barbara is very unhappy about it," remarked Mrs. Rowe.

"Has she told you so? She told me, with every appearance of sincerity, that she was very glad."

"As if what she told you, or me either, signified. No; she has not confided her unhappiness to me, but it is written in pretty plain characters upon her face. Don't go, Denis; be a good fellow, and don't go."

"Whether I am a good fellow or not may be open to doubt," answered Denis; "but there isn't the shadow of a doubt about my going. In fact, my kit has already been despatched to Aden. We are all of us apt to think that we could manage our neighbours' business better than they can manage it for themselves. I could give you advice respecting your own affairs which I believe to be thoroughly sound; but I hold



my peace because I know perfectly well what your reply would be. You would say that I am not sufficiently informed of all the circumstances to be a judge. Would it be inexcusably rude and ungrateful of me to say something of the same kind to you?"

It would be inaccurate, Mrs. Rowe thought; for she had long ere this been made the recipient of Barbara's full confession in the matter of Ernest Glyn. But she was precluded both by promise and prudence from stating this, and was, moreover, hampered by inability, as an honest woman, to make the only statement which was likely to be of any service—namely, that Barbara, in spite of all, still loved her husband. It was, unfortunately, far from certain that Barbara cherished such sentiments, while it was only too probable that she would interpret her husband's retirement from the scene as a tacit acquiescence in her complete emancipation. There was, therefore, little to be said, except:

"You will be sorry for this some day, I am afraid."

"Not if you can help it, I am sure," returned Denis, smiling. "Isn't it about time for us to take our leave now?"

Apparently, the majority of Mrs. Rowe's guests opined that the time had come for them to take theirs. They advanced upon her now, having ascertained her whereabouts, in large numbers and with those valedictory compliments upon the success of her entertainment which remain a provincial survival of good manners.

Amongst them was Barbara, in conversation with Mr. Asher, whose cheeks exhibited a dusky flush, as of anger.

"Oh, well," he was audibly saying, "it makes no difference to me: they will have to hunt the country

as best they can without a master, that's all; and I wish them joy of their job. I'll tell Hallett that I am good for a subscription of a hundred guineas, but for nothing more."

"You seem to have succeeded in putting our Semitic friend's back up," observed Denis, shortly afterwards, while he was driving away with his wife; "what have you been saying to him?"

"Only that granny won't call upon Mrs. Asher," Barbara answered. "Of course he was impertinent, as I knew he would be, and of course he will serve me a bad turn for this if he can."

"I scarcely see how he can," Denis remarked placidly.

"You so seldom see things. And even on the rare occasions when you do— But, happily for you, you will see nothing and nobody in Trentshire for some time to come. Angela Rowe, I presume, hasn't induced you to abandon your project."

"No; she failed there, although she did her best. But not at your instance, I take it?"

"Oh, certainly not at my instance," returned Barbara, laughing. "Out of deference to your deference to Mrs. Grundy I endeavoured to look disconsolate when I announced that you were off to Africa to shoot lions; but my disappointment would have been at least as great as yours if you had decided to stay at home and protect me against the attacks of possible wolves and jackals. I shall know how to protect myself, I hope."

"Upon the whole, I am inclined to believe that you will," Denis made calm reply.

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## CHAPTER XI

### THE TWO MASTERS

THE sun rose late and Mrs. Rowe rose early on a certain moist and misty morning, when the land was heavy with recent rains, and leaves of brilliant hue were fluttering down noiselessly, one by one, in the drenched woods. There was a fresh fragrance in the air; upon innumerable strands of gossamer, which were spread above the meadows and the thickets, drops of water glistened like diamonds under sharp shafts of light; the sharp crack of a whip, followed by the yelp of a young hound, rang out from some invisible point not far away, and presently, against the dark green of the coverts which fringed the Glyn demesne, a bobbing patch of scarlet revealed itself.

All these signs and tokens of the season were grateful alike to the big iron-gray horse who snorted, with pricked ears, in recognition of them and to the lady who sat square upon his broad back. Cubbing may be an overrated amusement, and the generality of hunting men and women find it so; but to Angela Rowe, a sportswoman born and bred, whom circumstances had long debarred from indulgence in any form of sport, it was very much what a draught of cold, fresh water is to thirsty pilgrims across the desert. This, notwithstanding frequent reminders of difference, George Hallett, who was provisionally hunting

the pack in partnership with Mr. Asher, was her first day, and it was forcibly borne in upon her that she was going to enjoy it. As she drew near the outskirts of the woods and became aware that some of the young entry were already misbehaving themselves, half a dozen or so of waiting horsemen raised their hats to her; then George himself, with a radiant countenance, rose up to exclaim:

"So here you are at last! I was beginning to despair of you."

"I should have been out before this," she answered, "but I couldn't very well manage it. Barbara Vale wanted me to stay with her after her husband left for Somaliland, and we can't ask other people's servants to get up in the middle of the night."

"Selfish little beggar, that woman!" remarked George.

"And how about Denis, who chooses to go off shooting lions when he might be hunting foxes?"

"Well, poor Denis is more of a shot than a hunting man at the best of times; but you know as well as I do that he wouldn't have fled the country if he hadn't been driven out of it."

Mrs. Rowe shook her head.

"Oh, you have made a friend of the grass-widow, whom I don't believe you like a bit in your heart," George went on, laughing; "and you won't say a word against her. That's all right, and just like you; I only hope you'll manage to keep her out of mischief. I shall fall foul of her, though, if she keeps you away from the hunting-field."

Mrs. Rowe declared that she would not do that, and inquired, to change the subject, "Where is your colleague?"

"In bed, I should think. Little do I care where

he is, so long as he isn't here. On the day of the opening meet I shall surrender the horn to him."

"Permanently?"

"I am afraid so—or rather, I hope so. This joint mastership can't last, you know; and, as far as I can make out, he really wants to take the hounds, though he persists in raising difficulties. Anyhow, he isn't keen about cub-hunting, which is a blessing for me. We ought to get a run this morning, with any luck."

"Are they going to find, do you think?" Mrs. Rowe asked, glancing in the direction of the hounds, who were brushing through the undergrowth.

"They *may*," answered George sceptically; "old Glyn swears that there are more foxes than pheasants in these woods; but I suspect his keeper knows better. We'll just draw them blank, for his satisfaction and ours, and then we'll move on to the gorse, when it is an ascertained fact that there are a couple of litters."

But this unworthy distrust of Mr. Glyn and his keeper was shown to be without foundation even while the acting M. F. H. spoke. With a sudden screech of "Gone away!" from the depths of the covert and a responsive twang from George's horn, the whole of the small field was in instant motion, and, during the twenty minutes which followed, Angela's anticipations of enjoyment were more than fulfilled.

A scurry down a shooting-drive; then a high-road and a gate, which somebody had flung open; then acres and acres of pasture, with the hounds streaming away on a burning scent; then an ugly blind fence, over which the gray hurled himself like a cannon-ball, and which stopped everybody, except the gray's mis-

tress and George Hallett—it is such transient experiences, after all, that render life worth living. Nothing can be said in depreciation of them, save that they are necessarily transient; nothing can equal them, unless perchance it be the joy of love's young dream—a joy which belonged neither to Angela's past nor to her possible future. Life hitherto had not been conspicuously happy for her, nor had it been the reverse; she was conscious of what she had missed, conscious also of what she had been spared, and she was by no means discontented with her lot. The cub eventually took refuge in a drain, and had to be dug out—which was a pity, although, for the sake of the hounds, an imperative obligation.

"Are you going to take them home now?" Angela inquired of the dismounted George, who was so good as to congratulate her upon the nerve and judgment with which she had ridden.

"No fear," he returned; adding somewhat reproachfully, "You don't mean to say that you have had enough of it!"

She laughed. "We could never have enough of it, could we?—you and I."

"Never!" he agreed emphatically. And then, with a wistful, half-apologetic glance at her, "There isn't anything else, you see."

"Oh, there are other things," she returned; "there is farming and magisterial and political work for you, and even I have my uses, such as they are. We are scarcely entitled to say that the sole reason of our existence is to hunt foxes."

Nevertheless she knew what he meant, and was sorry, as well as a little glad, that such should be his absurd meaning. No woman, least of all a plain one, can be altogether sorry that a man whom she likes

should remain faithful to an early sentimental affection for her which she has been unable to return; at the same time no sensible and unselfish woman can wish his life to be spoilt by that futile fidelity. Perhaps, so long as there were foxes in Trentshire to be hunted, George Hallett's life would not be without fair compensations; yet it was so obvious that he might with ease be made infinitely happier than he was likely, under actual conditions, to be! Angela Rowe was very well off—quite well enough off to enable her second husband, should she ever take one, to succeed the late M. F. H., and experience had taught her that what goes by the name of love is not absolutely essential to domestic felicity. Only her first husband had not asked or expected her to be in love with him; whereas George—well, George was somehow different.

She reflected during the remainder of the morning upon the difference that there undoubtedly was between George and the deceased invalid to whom she had willingly devoted herself up to the day of his death; but she could not, unfortunately, find that it consisted in any dawning of a tender passion on her part for the former, and nothing short of that would do, she was afraid.

For the rest, the remainder of the morning proved pleasant, not to say exciting. Another cub was killed in the open, after a run of half an hour without a check, and a third made good his escape; by which time, the sun being high, tired hounds and horses had accomplished as much as could be fairly demanded of them. The gray, to be sure, was still as fresh as a daisy; but not everybody was so well mounted as the gray's owner, nor were the kennels any longer as near at hand as they had been.

"This sort of thing," remarked George, jogging

homeward through the lanes at Mrs. Rowe's elbow, "is very bad for me."

"Why?" she inquired.

"Oh, you know why. It's all so thoroughly satisfactory while it lasts, and it can't by any possibility last."

"So you say; but it might go on for one season. Don't you think so?"

George shook his head and laughed. "Between you and me, that is just what I am hoping for at the bottom of my evil heart, and I have no business to hope for anything so prejudicial to the true interests of the hunt. Sometimes I say to myself that Asher doesn't really know the country, while I do, and that a year's interregnum would enable me to give him hints which would be of use to him hereafter; but that's only a specious excuse. It stands to reason that the sooner he assumes sole command the better."

"But if he won't?"

"It's longish odds that he will. He really wants to take the hounds, and I suspect that he is one of that lucky minority who always end by getting what they want. As for me, I belong to the majority who don't."

"I think you must admit that you are rather better off than the majority of mankind," Mrs. Rowe urged.

"I admit," George answered, "that I have good health and plenty of occupations and a sufficient income for a bachelor. I'm not complaining; only, as a matter of fact, I haven't got, and am not going to get, what I want a great deal more than any of those blessings. Perhaps you, on your side, will admit that."

"Well, you haven't got the mastership; I wish with all my heart you had."



"Thanks; I am sure you do. The mastership, I don't deny, would be a consolation if it was a possibility. And, as I was saying to you a while ago, there isn't anything else."

Mrs. Rowe touched the gray with her heel and broke into a canter, by way of closing the colloquy. There was in truth nothing else that she could do for her too faithful swain than to help him towards partial and temporary consolation; but she might manage to accomplish that much, she thought. It was, after all, a mere question of keeping matters in abeyance and continuing to dangle Lady Mount-Sorrel as a bait before the noses of the expectant Ashers.

"I suppose," said George wistfully, when they reached a point at which their respective roads diverged, "you won't be out again on Friday? We meet at the old toll-bar, not a couple of miles from you, and we think of drawing Sandy Wood, which is always a pretty good certainty, as you know."

"I can't resist Sandy Wood," she answered. "Oh, yes; I shall come out, unless something unforeseen occurs to prevent me."

George drew a long breath of satisfaction. "Ah! Then there's that to look forward to, anyhow," he observed.

There was that to look forward to. It was not much, in comparison with what might have been, nor was the temporary joint management of the hounds much, as compared with the sole mastership which would have been gladly conferred upon as popular a sportsman as George Hallett, were he blessed with the adequate, indispensable income; yet half a loaf is better than no bread. This, no doubt, was his opinion, as it was the regretful conclusion of Angela Rowe, who could not offer to share her own loaf with

him, small though her personal appetite was. While changing her clothes and making herself tidy for luncheon, she took a rather longer survey of her features in the looking-glass than she was wont to bestow upon their undeniable homeliness, and wondered what attraction they could possibly have for any member of the opposite sex.

"They can't have any," she murmured at length. "If he is in love with me—and since I am all by myself, why should I not confess that I know he is?—it must be because he is the victim of some insane illusion which marriage would speedily dispel. What then? I am not in love with him; my vanity would not suffer; we should remain the best of friends, and the chances are that he would go down to his grave without ever suspecting himself of having been anything but an exceptionally fortunate man. It seems so stupid to shrink from doing for him what I would do quite cheerfully for almost anybody else."

She turned away from the uncompromisingly truthful mirror with an impatient laugh. "Why on earth," she exclaimed, "can't I contrive to fall in love with him? That would be such a simple and satisfactory solution of the difficulty. What suffering might result in the sequel would be a great deal more mine than his, and I really do believe that my solid, stolid common sense would save me from suffering much or long."

She was, however, persuaded that it was beyond her to become enamoured of George Hallett; and that being so, the spending of her unmanageably large income must needs continue under her own control. She might, to be sure, render him some provisional assistance by contributing a handsome anonymous donation to the hunt fund, and by diplomatically

playing fast and loose with his destined supplanter; more than that she did not see her way to achieve.

Such being her disposition of mind, she could not but congratulate herself upon the chance which brought her face to face with Mr. Asher that afternoon, while she was trudging down to visit some of the many poor people whom the parish, which was an outlying suburb of Blackhampton, contained. Mr. Asher raised his hat, disclosing a puckered brow, and jumped off his cob.

"I have just been up to the kennels," he announced. "You had pretty good sport this morning, I hear."

"Very good indeed," she answered. "Why were you not out?"

Mr. Asher had been absent because he disliked rising by candle-light; but he preferred to assign another reason. "Oh, it doesn't do," he replied, "to have two masters in the field at one and the same time. If Hallett is going to boss the whole show, I must efface myself; that's all. Rather a bore to be done out of one's hunting through having been a good-natured fool; but you'll say that I have only myself to thank. Quite true; I ought never to have consented to an arrangement which was bound to turn out unworkable."

"It will work well enough for a time," Angela urged. "I am sure, from what Mr. Hallett has told me, that he will always be ready to give way to you when you come out, and of course nobody ever imagined that the present state of things could last for more than one season."

"Good Lord! Does anybody imagine that it is going to last through a whole season?"

"Well, that depends upon you, does it not? I

suppose you could put an end to it to-morrow, if you chose."

"No, Mrs. Rowe, I couldn't. Lady Mount-Sorrel could put an end to it, if she chose; but it seems that she doesn't choose. It seems, too, that you and Mrs. Vale and a few others whom I might name are rather more fond of a one-sided bargain than I am. I was led to believe, when I acquiesced in this preposterous joint-mastership plan, that you were bestirring yourselves; but you have accomplished nothing up to now, and, to speak plainly, I begin to doubt whether you ever meant to accomplish anything, except the maintaining of the hounds at my expense."

"Don't you think," asked Angela, "that that is rather rude and rather unfair?"

"It may be rude," answered Mr. Asher; "I can't see where the unfairness comes in. Just consider my position. I am requested to spend no end of a lot of money in keeping up the credit of the county and the hunt, and my answer is, 'All right; only the county mustn't treat me like a pariah if I do.' Well, what happens? I get some vague promises, which are not fulfilled, and I am given to understand that it is for me to take the next step. Much obliged; but that isn't my way of doing business. You know very well, all of you, that I am prepared to keep my word: what security have I that you will stick to yours?"

"Well, you see," answered Angela, who was bent upon conciliating the man, "you happened to ask us for something which we couldn't hope to obtain all at once; but we have done, and are still doing, our best. It is a case, I think, for a little patience on both sides. If we are willing to leave the question of the mastership in abeyance, why shouldn't you leave the hounds

"H'm! Suppose I were to say that I don't care enough about the mastership to await Lady Mount-Sorrel's good pleasure? You would be in a hole then, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, dear, no! What would happen then, most likely, would be that Mr. Hallett would be asked to take the hounds, and that enough money would be guaranteed to enable him to accept. A good many of the subscribers, I believe, would welcome that arrangement, though you, perhaps, would hardly be one of them."

"I don't know whether I should be one of the subscribers or not; I certainly should raise no objection to the arrangement," Mr. Asher declared.

But in truth, as Angela had divined, he wanted very much to be master of the North Trent Hounds, and he hated the idea of being ousted by George Hallett, of whom he was already more than a little jealous. He therefore lent a willing ear to plausible representations and counsels which sounded friendly. Lady Mount-Sorrel, it was intimated to him, was one of those opinionated persons whose hand it is impossible to force; yet she had a very strong sense of public duty, while nobody realized more clearly than she did the obligation of supporting local institutions. If left to herself, she would probably end by doing on her own initiative what she would perhaps refuse to do under outside pressure.

"In short," observed Mr. Asher, after some further parley, "what you would advise is an indefinite protraction of the *status quo*."

"That," answered the wily Angela, "is what I should advise. Unless, of course, you prefer to withdraw your candidature altogether."

"W Asher pinched his under lip between his finger

and thumb. "All very fine; but how about my wife? I needn't tell you that she doesn't care a brass farthing about the hounds; but, for some absurd woman's reason or other, she cares a lot about being called upon by Lady Mount-Sorrel."

"Then," answered Mrs. Rowe, "I am sure she is clever enough to understand that the surest way of inducing Lady Mount-Sorrel to call is to give no more hints, and to quietly establish her own position in the county. A master of hounds—even if, for the time being, he is only a joint master—can't very well be ignored by his neighbours."

Mrs. Asher, it subsequently appeared, was rather more clever than that; for when, on his return home, her husband gave her an account of the above interview and of the advice which he had received, she laughed aloud.

"My poor Reuben," she exclaimed, "for an astute man of business you are about as innocent as they make them. Don't you see what all this means?"

"I see," he replied sullenly, "that I am being put off. What of that? I'm putting them off too, you know; I'm not committing myself."

"You would disappoint Mrs. Rowe horribly if you did. What she wants is to gain time; and why, do you suppose, does she want to gain time? Well, as you have no eyes in your head, nor much intelligence either, I'll tell you. Her little game is to marry Mr. Hallett, who could very well afford to take the hounds with her money; only she is too old-fashioned to propose to him, and he is too shy or too proud or something to propose to her. Now does it begin to dawn upon you that you are in danger of playing the accommodating idiot? You can sell these good people in one of two ways: either you can take the hounds

at once, or you can turn your back upon them and their county. Where you are pretty well bound to come to grief is by accepting a compromise."

"Isabella, you are too confoundedly sharp; you've hit upon a mare's nest, I expect. Anyhow, considering that I should have taken the hounds long ago but for you, it seems rather odd that you should recommend me to take them now."

"My dear man, I don't recommend you to take them. I think, as I have thought all along, that you will be a goose to take them, for I am not going to stay the whole winter at Beaulieu unless that old cat makes up her mind to be civil to me. Only I warn you that you will have to do the one thing or the other."

Mr. Asher silently withdrew. He did not wish to adopt either of the suggested alternatives; he was disinclined to accept the mastership now without his stipulated *quid pro quo*; still more disinclined was he to quit Trentshire and dispose of an establishment which had cost him a small fortune. But it seemed to him that the game was not yet narrowed within the limits ascribed to it by his wife.

"I'll be shot," said he to himself, "if Hallett shall snatch the bread out of my mouth by marrying Mrs. Rowe! No; I'll be shot if he shall do that!"

## CHAPTER XII

### EPISCOPAL COUNSEL

THE Bishop of Blackhampton, seated in the rather gloomy study which was practically the only inhabited sitting-room in his not very palatial palace, passed a thin hand across a furrowed brow and sighed wearily. His tired eyes, raised for a moment from the mass of disordered correspondence on the table before him, surveyed a stretch of neglected garden and smoke-begrimed shrubs, while the partially deadened roar of street traffic vexed his ears. For the diocese of Blackhampton, being one of recent creation, possessed as yet no adequate episcopal residence, and this old house, though capacious and, by reason of its situation, near the heart of the city, was ill-adapted to the requirements of a person whose rare hours of leisure demanded silence and peace.

However, it was not much that the bachelor bishop cared about luxury or even comfort. He was at times vaguely aware of being uncomfortable; but this was a small matter compared with the more definite consciousness which pressed upon him every now and again of being baffled and worsted in a perpetual struggle. Something he had accomplished, and was accomplishing, by dint of hard work, year in and year out, under those low gray skies. But progress was lamentably slow; one step forward was only too apt to be fol-



lowed by two steps back; and the men upon whom he chiefly relied for support, the men who really had at heart what he had at least, were precisely those against whom he might at a given moment be forced to assume an attitude of antagonism.

Here, for example, was a letter from the Vicar of Glyn, respectful, affectionate, submissive, yet, under cover of language to which no exception could be taken, clearly menacing. The vicar, bowing to the wish and authority of his father in God, would for the present discontinue the ceremonial use of incense; but he earnestly hoped that no further strain would be put upon his allegiance. With regard to externals, his conscience would, he believed, always allow him to give way, deeply though he must deplore what he could not but regard as an ignorant assault upon ancient Catholic usage. But other points were said to be at issue; other and far more important questions were liable to be raised, respecting which it would be impossible for him, as an ordained priest of the Church of England, to yield one inch. Full well the bishop knew that those important questions were in danger of being raised, and plainly did he foresee the danger of raising them.

"We shall drive these fellows over to Rome in a body; that will be the end of it," he muttered. "Of course they won't admit that Rome is their sole available refuge; but they will find that it is, and we shall find, when we have lost them, that we can't get on without them. The Glyn people, at any rate, can't get on without Doddridge; although his letter reads like a clear warning that they will have, sooner or later, to dispense with the indispensable."

Another letter which had been delivered by the same post was only a little less discouraging. This

set forth in bold, legible handwriting Mr. Asher's regret that he could not see his way to inclose the check which he had hoped to forward at that date. His correspondent, he observed, would readily understand that the portion of income which any man could set aside for charitable purposes must be distributed in accordance with fixed principles, one of the most stringent of these being the priority of local claims. Now, it was no longer, unfortunately, certain that the diocese of Blackhampton had such claims upon the writer's benevolence. It was quite possible, not to say probable, that, as the result of certain disappointments and unfulfilled pledges which there was no need to particularize, Beaulieu would shortly be put up for sale, and, in that event, some other district would naturally become entitled to pecuniary aid from Mr. Asher. Sorry though he would be to quit a county to which he was personally attached and in which he might perhaps venture to think that he had been of some little use, he nevertheless felt that public spirit met with singularly slight appreciation in Trentshire, and it was thus a question with him whether he might not take up his abode more profitably to his neighbours, as well as more agreeably to himself, elsewhere.

"One perceives," mused the bishop ruefully, "what that means. No Lady Mount-Sorrel, no hounds; no hounds, no alms for me. And I want that cheque so badly, too!"

He wanted it, and the poor of Blackhampton wanted it, as did the additional curates, for his episcopal stipend was a modest one, while his private means were not large. Even had they been large, he would assuredly by that time of the year have reduced his balance at the bank, through discriminate yet profuse charity, to something near a vanishing point. Con-

sequently, he was saying to himself, "I suppose I must attack the old lady once more," when he was informed that Lady Mount-Sorrel was in the drawing-room, awaiting and demanding an audience.

"How extraordinary of her," the bishop muttered, as he hurried off to receive his distinguished visitor; "but, at the same time, how opportune! What *can* she want?"

What Lady Mount-Sorrel immediately wanted, it appeared, was a cup of tea and a fire at which to warm her hands. She made prompt announcement of these needs, and added that, having driven into the city to do a little shopping, she had made so bold as to seek passing hospitality at the palace.

"But perhaps you have not begun fires yet? My dear lord, is it necessary—I might almost, as one connected by blood with your dear mother, and old enough to be your own grandmother, ask, is it fitting—that you should live in this atmosphere of chill penury?"

A sweeping circular gesture of her little gloved hand protested against the faded curtains and scanty furniture of the great, gaunt apartment, which was, in truth, seldom entered, save on dinner-party evenings.

"I apologize," answered the bishop, laughing. "Penurious I am, but chilly I am not; and if you will condescend to come away from this dreary splendour into my sanctum, you will at least be able to warm yourself, while they are getting the tea and the buttered toast."

Lady Mount-Sorrel rose with alacrity. "The dreariness of your reception-room is more noticeable than its splendour," she remarked; "bishops have no business to be bachelors. Yes, I will certainly invade your sanctum, since you are so kind as to invite me.

As the carriage will not be here for another half-hour, I must trespass upon your forbearance for that length of time, I am afraid, whether you are busy or not."

"Dear Lady Mount-Sorrel, you know I am never too busy to see you, and never more happy than when I can enjoy a talk with you."

He conducted her into the adjoining study, made her comfortable in an arm-chair by the fireside, and wondered, with some curiosity, what could be the subject of discussion to which she had allotted in advance a clear space of thirty minutes. Since, however, she seemed in no hurry to proclaim her errand, and since she had the appearance of being in a good humour, he presently inquired:

"Any more letters to the Times?"

"I have written none," Lady Mount-Sorrel replied gravely, "and publicity is so distasteful to me that I trust it may not become my duty to write any. Nor do I know that the editor would print a letter from me, if I did."

"He would undoubtedly print it," the bishop declared; "at this season of the year he might even print it in big type and comment upon it in a leading article: 'The views of the venerable and well-known lady whose protest we publish in another column will not fail to command the respectful sympathy of all moderate and thoughtful persons.' I can see it from here, that leading article, with its lofty condemnation of mutinous clerics and its admonition to timorous and time-serving prelates. But it will not require to be penned just yet, you will be glad to hear; for upon this table lies poor Doddridge's mournful submission. He is abandoning incense and processional lights at my entreaty—and your orders."

Lady Mount-Sorrel nodded approvingly. "I am

indeed glad to hear it. This is better than the subtlety and evasion of which we have had so many sad examples lately. Better also—if I may say it without undue presumption—than treating a very serious matter in what I cannot but feel to be a spirit of levity.”

“There are moments,” returned the bishop, “when levity affords a temporary relief which you should be the last to grudge me. Admit, at least, that I have loyally done what I undertook to do, thus making a preliminary poke at the wasps’ nest into which you are so anxious that I should thrust my head. Is it not your turn now to redeem the promise that you gave me as an equivalent?”

“I have many failings and many infirmities,” Lady Mount-Sorrel meekly owned; “but I do not think that I have ever been accused of failure to keep my word, and I believe I may boast of an unimpaired memory. I remember very well, for instance, that, although you tried to extort a promise from me on the afternoon when you tore my letter to bits, you obtained no such thing. What atrocious tea this is! I daresay you pay a high price for it, too, and you buy it, no doubt, from the grocer.”

“I am sorry it isn’t good; I don’t know what it costs,” said the bishop. “But doesn’t everybody buy tea from the grocer?”

Lady Mount-Sorrel threw up her hands. “A more pathetic question I never heard! It only shows the truth of what I was saying just now, that you ought no longer to remain a bachelor. Why don’t you marry Angela Rowe? She would be an admirable wife for you.”

“She would be admirable, I am sure, in any part. Unfortunately, I have no reason to suppose that the one which you suggest would recommend itself to her.”

"Nothing is more simple than to find out how that may be. Come now; we are all by ourselves, and I am a tomb of secrets. You *are* fond of her in your heart, aren't you?"

"I am extremely fond of her," answered the bishop, laughing; "but this, let me remind you, is a digression. I was going to ask you, when you drew a red herring across the scent, why you are so obstinate and unaccommodating about Mr. and Mrs. Asher, who have done nothing to offend you, and whom you might make happy at a very trifling expenditure of time and trouble."

"Obstinate and unaccommodating! Coming from the bishop of the diocese, that is a rather severe censure," Lady Mount-Sorrel remarked.

"Why incur it, then? I am the less disposed to withdraw my words because I can't help remembering that you never hesitate to censure me when you think me deserving of blame, and I quite honestly feel that unneighbourly behaviour is blameworthy."

Her ladyship chuckled. "What a heavy bribe that Jew must have offered you! The difference between us, you see, is that I am incorruptible; he can neither harm nor benefit me in any imaginable way. However, I didn't come here to talk about him."

"You came, perhaps, because you thought that I could benefit you in some imaginable way. I have noticed that that motive is accountable for the visits of most of my friends."

"Well, my dear lord, your friends could scarcely pay you a higher compliment than to take it for granted that you are willing to help them when they are in trouble."

"Oh, if you are in trouble——"

"You must be aware that I am. I can't sleep at

nights for thinking about that silly little grand-daughter of mine, who has been so inexcusably deserted by her husband."

"The desertion may have been ill-advised; I don't think it was altogether inexcusable," said the bishop.

"You don't, eh? That is just the question; and you, who are a man of the world and a frequenter of society, must be in a better position to answer it than I can be."

"I hardly know what you mean by a man of the world," the bishop said; "I certainly do not frequent gay society."

"Oh, yes, you do. You were in London nearly the whole of last season; you know everybody; you hear things and see things. When you give it as your opinion that there are excuses for Denis Vale, you can only mean that Barbara has been behaving very badly."

The bishop was inclined to hope not. Some allowance, he observed, must be made for a very pretty young woman who had naturally been surrounded by admirers, and some also for a man of Denis's rather uncompromising temperament. "It is an unfortunate business, but I doubt whether there is very much to be done at present. He is angry with his wife, and I don't say that he is angry without some cause; still he is fond of her and fond of his children——"

"Oh, leave him alone and *he'll* come home," interrupted the old lady impatiently; "I have no fears about *him*. What is so dangerous is that he has left her with plenty of money and liberty to spend it when and where she pleases. She actually talks, I believe, of going off to Monte Carlo after Christmas."

"I don't think," said the bishop, "that Mrs. Rowe

will let her do that. Mrs. Rowe is looking after her."

"So I understand. By your request, too, unless I have been misinformed. It is evident that Angela Rowe is willing to do a good deal to please you; for Barbara is not at all the sort of friend whom she would have chosen to please herself. Well—provided that that imbecile young Glyn remains on the other side of the Atlantic! But I hear from his equally imbecile mother that he already pretends to be down with malaria or something."

"It appears," observed the bishop, with a smile, "that you contrive to hear a number of things, although you no longer go to London for the season."

"Oh, I have eyes and ears—a few correspondents, too, and informants. Helen Glyn is too great a goose to suspect anything; she wants to get that precious boy of hers home on sick leave. What are we to do if he turns up in the course of the winter?"

"In that case, I am afraid poor Mrs. Rowe would have to sacrifice her hunting and accompany your grand-daughter to the Riviera."

"I believe she would do it, if you asked her; she really is a good soul. Now tell me, was Barbara *very* much talked about in London?—in connection with Ernest Glyn, I mean."

"A little; not very much, as far as I could learn, and such gossip is soon forgotten."

"In London, yes; but not in the country. One comfort is that, although everybody in these parts knows that there has been a quarrel, nobody guesses the cause of it. At least, I hope not. What do you think?"

"I am not even certain," answered the bishop, "that young Glyn was the cause of the quarrel. In



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"I am not even certain," answered the bishop, "that young Glyn was the cause of the quarrel. In

any case, he was not at home long enough to compromise himself or Mrs. Vale."

Then a bright idea suddenly occurred to him, and he added: "Nevertheless, there is, now that I come to think of it, one person in Trentshire—Mrs. Asher—who belongs to the smartest London set, and who would be quite sure to hear all the rumours that there were to be heard at the time of which you speak. She is not, to my knowledge, an ill-natured woman, and your grand-daughter, luckily, has been polite enough to call upon her; still——"

"Yes, yes; you are very ingenious. But you forget that, by your own account, there is no one whom Mrs. Asher can be less anxious to annoy or affront than me."

"Indeed no; that is the very thing that I remember. She may—I do not for one moment assert that it is so, I merely throw out the suggestion—she may have been keeping silence all this time rather than risk annoying you, and she may, when she finds that her forbearance has been of no avail, change her tactics. Would it not, perhaps, be worth while to take precautions against such a disagreeable possibility?"

At this juncture Lady Mount-Sorrel's carriage was announced. It was not without a certain quiet dignity that she remarked, while she rose and accepted the bishop's aid in donning her fur-lined cloak:

"I am sorry that you should have thought fit to fortify your championship of these people by what has very much the appearance of a threat. Methods of that description, as you might surely have known, are seldom effectual with me."

"You won't call upon them, then?"

"You have made it extremely difficult for me to

do so. But never mind; you meant well, I have no doubt, and Barbara should be safe with two such friends to keep watch over her as you and Angela Rowe. Don't allow that emissary of the Vatican at Glyn to defy you. Good-bye."

The bishop, after his distinguished visitor had departed, accused himself of having been singularly stupid and tactless. He ought, and he acknowledged it, have realized the futility of attempting to frighten Lady Mount-Sorrel. Her ladyship, however, had not proceeded very far on her homeward way when she stopped the carriage and gave orders to the footman, who jumped down, that she was to be driven to the Red House.

"To Bewley, my lady?" inquired the man hesitatingly.

"You can call it by any ridiculous name you like," she answered, "but go there."

Thither, accordingly, the fat horses and the heavy brougham were urged, and three cards were delivered to the butler, flanked by a brace of powdered subordinates, who appeared at the entrance of Mr. Asher's fine mansion. There was a brief parley between this functionary and Lady Mount-Sorrel's footman, at the end of which the latter returned to the carriage window and said, in faltering, deprecating accents, "Mrs. Asher is in, my lady."

Lady Mount-Sorrel's voice was so clear and penetrating in quality that she never had occasion to raise it. The expectant butler on the door-step must have heard, and may possibly have been intended to hear, her gravely reproachful rejoinder.

"I did not tell you, Charles, to make any inquiry upon that subject. Home now."



## CHAPTER XIII

### THE INTERESTING INVALID

It was rather hard luck for Angela Rowe that, just as she had been promising herself a few months of cub-hunting, she should be called away to the bedside of a dying relative who, after all, did not die, and who proved a fractious and ungrateful patient to nurse; but she never counted such experiences as matters for complaint. Her essentially feminine cravings, balked of their natural wifely and maternal outlet, were soothed by any demand that might be made upon her time and patience. She liked to think that she was wanted, that there was at least somebody in the world who could not get on comfortably without her, and the fulfilment of what she conceived to be her sole mission in life was rendered additionally satisfactory to her when it happened to entail a certain measure of self-sacrifice. Nevertheless, she was not sorry to reach home again, after a fortnight's absence; nor (being a woman) did she groan at the sight of an accumulation of letters and notes which the servants, whose discrimination in that respect is always based upon such inscrutable principles, had omitted to forward to her.

Many of these she found quite interesting; but two only among the number had any bearing upon the development of the present narrative: the first being an

invitation to dinner from Lady Helen Glyn, and the second an urgent entreaty from Barbara Vale, who had heard of her impending return, that she would lunch at Southacre on the morrow.

"I want you," Lady Helen wrote, "to come and help us to cheer up Ernest, whom we are expecting almost hourly, and who has been so dreadfully ill, poor boy! The doctors ordered him to England at a moment's notice, and although the telegram which tells us of his arrival at Southampton says that he has benefited by the voyage, I am afraid he must be terribly shaken and pulled down. The great thing, I believe, after these depressing attacks of fever, is to amuse the convalescent, and you know how few amusements our quiet manner of life has to offer to young men. So do be charitable, as you always are, and lend us a hand."

Barbara, it appeared, was also sadly in need of diversion, but required, besides, that sympathy and advice with regard to an unspecified complication which had arisen. "I really can't think what I had better do," she declared; "and you are absolutely the only living being it is possible for me to consult. There isn't much time to be lost either; at any moment I may find myself face to face with a crisis which I am sure to treat in the wrong way unless I am guided and supported by you, who never make mistakes."

There was, at all events, small opening for mistakes as to the nature of the crisis thus alluded to. Of course Barbara had heard—probably from the young man himself—of Ernest Glyn's very inopportune restoration to the bosom of his family, and the chances of her treating that event in the wrong way were indeed greater than that she would deal with it rationally. Mrs. Rowe, therefore, did not hesitate to

give up the morning's sport to which she had been looking forward, and of which a post-card, addressed in George Hallett's handwriting, would have reminded her, had she forgotten it.

Southacre, under a low, leaden sky, and bereft of all its summer glories, looked somewhat deserted and forlorn the next day. Deserted and forlorn, too, looked the little golden-haired mistress of the establishment, who, however, hastened to repudiate the compassion to which her friend could not help giving utterance on that score.

"Oh, if you think that I miss Denis, you are very much mistaken. My one consolation is that he is not here to accentuate the horrors of the season by his brutal enjoyment of it. Fortunately, lions have even greater charms for him than pheasants. He has shot three already, besides a panther, and I forget how many gazelles."

"You have heard from him, then?"

Barbara jerked up her shoulders. "Oh, naturally. That is for the sake of the servants, who might be shocked if I didn't. They would certainly be edified if they saw the letters with which I am favoured. 'Dear Barbara—We are sending a fellow down to the coast to catch the home mail. We are all right, though the nights are colder than one would expect them to be so far south. I am sorry to say that I missed an easy shot at a lion yesterday; but I was more lucky the day before, killing two close to our camp. Love to the children. Yours, D.' That is the usual sort of thing, and as it doesn't seem to cry aloud for a reply, it doesn't get any."

"I think," said Angela, "you might let him have some news of the children, even if you don't believe that he wants any of yourself."

"He gave full instructions upon that point before he left; he is so thoughtful. Every week Miss Beamish despatches a report to Aden, upon the chance of its reaching him sooner or later. No doubt she is under the impression that I do likewise. Well, let us go and eat now. Oh, how glad I am to see you again, Angela! If I haven't missed Denis all this time, I have missed you to the extent of having been more than once on the brink of telegraphing for you."

The presence of Dicky and Di in the dining-room was of course a bar to confidences; but these were forthcoming as soon as the children, who were now upon terms of intimate alliance with Mrs. Rowe, had reluctantly withdrawn, and Barbara's difficulty proved to be exactly what had been anticipated.

"I suppose you know," she began, "that *he* is on his way home. In fact, he may have reached home at this moment, and I rather suspect that he has."

"I know," answered Mrs. Rowe, "that young Glyn is with his people, or will be presently; I know of no reason why you should underline him like that or mention him with bated breath."

Barbara made a grimace and a little impatient gesture. "O Angela! After all that I have told you!"

"I remember your telling me, amongst other things, that you would not care a straw if you never saw him again."

"Ah, that was when I thought that in all probability I never should see him again—at least, not for a year or two, which is practically never. His turning up so soon and so unexpectedly does make a difference; you must admit that it makes a difference. Besides——"

"What besides?"

"If you look at me in that stern and virtuous way, Angela, I won't say another word. There, that is a much pleasanter and more encouraging expression of countenance. I was going to remark that, after all, one can't, unless one has a heart of stone, help caring just a little bit for people who are so faithful and devoted."

"How do you know that he is faithful and devoted?"

Barbara laughingly evaded that direct query. "As if he had had time to become anything else, poor boy! One may guess that his fever is only a diplomatic fever, and it is atrocious of him, I own, to come back; still, it is rather pretty of him, too; don't you think so?"

"Barbara, I will not allow you to make a fool of yourself."

"I am sure you won't; that is just why I sent for you. But what am I to do? There is no use in telling me to keep out of his way; he will take very good care to make that impossible. And if I meet him, as, in the nature of things, I must and shall——"

"When you meet him, or even perhaps without meeting him, you can surely give him to understand that he is nothing to you."

"Oh, I *could*, of course; only it wouldn't be quite true, you see; and I am such a wretched hand at telling fibs. There is the alternative of Monte Carlo; but, simply and solely in order to please you and win your approval, I had mentally abandoned Monte Carlo."

Mrs. Rowe smothered a sigh. Monte Carlo would hardly do; but she began to perceive that it might have to be Mentone or San Remo, and that she herself might be called upon to migrate thither in charge of

Denis Vale's wife, instead of following the hounds. So accurately had the bishop and Lady Mount-Sorrel taken the measure of her altruism.

"He can't force himself upon you if you shut the door in his face," she remarked, after a short pause.

"Not so long as I choose to sit behind it, perhaps; but why should I accept the part of a besieged and terror-stricken fugitive? My jailor has gone gaily off to East Africa, leaving me the key of the fields. I don't see why I am bound to deny myself the liberty which he considers is safe to place in my hands."

"Except because he does consider it safe to do so."

"Oh, but he wouldn't unless he counted upon my being too self-indulgent to risk the loss of what he looks upon as a comfortable position in life. Please don't try to make out that Denis is a trusting and chivalrous husband; whatever he may be, he isn't that."

"I am not his champion," declared Mrs. Rowe, who indeed knew better than to pose in so unpromising a character; "I think he has behaved almost as foolishly as you have—which is saying a good deal. All the same, I doubt whether he would have gone to Somaliland if he had foreseen this complication."

"I am not so sure that he didn't foresee it; and, to tell you the truth, Angela, I don't care whether he did or not. He hasn't troubled his head about me; so I am not going to trouble mine about him. I am much more concerned about Ernest, who is really unhappy, I am afraid, and whom it would be quite absurd and out of the question for me to cut, say what you will."

The prolonged colloquy which ensued was conducted with much discretion on Mrs. Rowe's side; for it was evident that such influence as she could

boast of over her wayward confidante was liable to be placed in jeopardy if strained. She took away with her the discouraging impression that Ernest Glyn was to all intents and purposes master of the situation. Not that Barbara was in love with him; but pique and boredom and lack of occupation have from time immemorial led more women astray than love has ever done. Prior to going astray, they not unfrequently appeal to advisers of their own sex, who, from the nature of the case, can make no other representations to them than those which their own consciences and common sense (in the unusual event of their having any) must have already suggested; the only practical method of serving and saving them is either to snatch them away from a perilous vicinity, or to choke off their lovers. Hunting prospects, therefore, looked gloomy; for it was not very easy to see how Ernest Glyn was to be choked off, much as Mrs. Rowe would have enjoyed choking that invalided young marplot.

Lady Helen could have given her a hint, and, in fact, did give her one when, on the following evening, and in compliance with a second summons, she went to dine with her neighbours at Glyn Place. But its significance was lost upon her, for nobody ever thought of paying much heed to the nonsense which Lady Helen habitually talked.

"This is most good and kind of you," the fond mother cried. "Dear Ernest is so thin and languid, and out of spirits, that it quite breaks my heart to see him. He has only brightened up once since he arrived, and that was when I told him that you were coming to us to-night."

Dear Ernest put in a rather late appearance to confirm the maternal description of him by his pallid

complexion and faint, pathetic smile. He had been genuinely ill, and was most unfeignedly sorry for himself; but he was not, as Mrs. Rowe soon discovered, suffering from the results of a forbidden passion. He had not been seated beside her at the dinner-table for five minutes before it began to dawn upon her surprised and slightly shocked consciousness that he had well-nigh, if not altogether, forgotten an episode which he ought to have been remembering with remorse, or hope, or misgiving, or at any rate with some sort of emotion or other. He inquired for Mrs. Vale, mentioned that he had heard of her husband's departure for Africa in quest of big game, and said something about its being rather hard upon a woman who did not hunt to be left in the chilly midlands for a winter all by herself; but this was only because his neighbour had purposely led up to the subject. The subject which interested him, and about which he was anxious to talk, was evidently that of his own health, which seemed to have caused him the greatest disquietude. He was getting better, he said, and the doctors spoke encouragingly of his case; still he had been awfully bad—"but really *awfully* bad, you know"—and it was a question whether he would ever be able to return to his insalubrious post. He expected that he would have to exchange with some fellow in the Foreign Office, if he could find any fellow crazy enough to covet exile under its least attractive aspect.

"That vile climate has taken years off my life," he declared. "I feel as if I had been away from England for an eternity, and I don't feel as if anything short of dire necessity would persuade me to leave England again."

Either this vapid, good-looking young man was a consummate actor (which did not seem likely), or else



he had completely got over his attachment to Barbara Vale, and there was no ground for the suspicion that he was in epistolary touch with her. If Angela Rowe was for a time in doubt as to which was the correct hypothesis, his subsequent behaviour was of a nature to enlighten her. Absurd and incredible though it appeared at first sight that Ernest Glyn could be laboriously undertaking the task of making love to her, she ended by realizing that such was indeed the aim which he had set before himself, or which had been set before him, and her intelligence enabled her to form a pretty shrewd guess at his motives for so doing. Naturally, he would prefer ease and idleness to South America or to daily drudgery at the Foreign Office; naturally, also, his parents would like nothing better than to see him in joint possession of Brayton Lodge and a comfortable income.

Now, Angela Rowe was one of the very best women in a world which, when the worst has been said of it that can be said, must be admitted to contain some admirable specimens of her sex; but this discovery was a little too much for her wonted straightforward integrity of purpose and conduct. She was bent upon bringing about an ultimate reconciliation between Denis Vale and his wife; she wanted very badly to enjoy a season's hunting; she hated the idea of having to go abroad for the winter, and she perceived how easily that measure of precaution might be rendered superfluous. Could she, under all these circumstances, be expected to refrain from giving some perfidious encouragement to a young miscreant who richly deserved any disappointment that might in the sequel fall to his share? At all events, she did not refrain, and the remainder of the evening proved quite as satisfactory to her as it did to Ernest and Lady

Helen, while she obtained a good deal more amusement out of it than they did.

A few people were staying in the house. Mr. Doddridge and one or two other neighbours had been invited to join the informal party, which was sufficiently numerous to afford cover for confidential intercourse. In the dining-room, and afterward in a nook of the dim conservatory, whither she permitted herself to be led, Mrs. Rowe was privileged to hear many details concerning the young Ernest's life, past and present. Thus she learned how stormy, albeit brief, his career had been, and how little he was to blame for divers incidents which might, by the ignorant and unsympathetic, be pronounced discreditable to him. He delighted in talking about himself; he was happily free from any surmise that what had befallen him was precisely what befalls ninety-nine young men out of every hundred, and he was listened to with an interest which was not altogether feigned; for Angela Rowe's participation in the joys and sorrows of her fellow-mortals was real, even when she had some ado to keep herself from laughing at their artless avowals. To pour forth the history of bygone amours and indiscretions may seem an odd way of laying siege to any lady's affections; yet it is a method which has often been employed with success, and Ernest, after all, was not in love with Mrs. Rowe, only alive to her great personal and adventitious attractions. He was not in love; but he was considerably in debt—a circumstance which he did not omit, in his trusting candour, to mention, and of which he added that the governor had as yet no inkling.

The governor, pompously erect upon the hearth-rug and caressing a receding chin, watched his younger son from afar with benevolent approbation. It was

Mr. Glyn's opinion that things were going very well—very well indeed. He was probably likewise of opinion that the lady of Brayton Lodge had been sent into the world for the express purpose of affording succour to her friends and neighbours in time of need; which was a pardonable enough view to take, seeing that it was shared by that lady herself. As for Lady Helen, her satisfaction knew no bounds, and was not to be restrained from expression by any conventional prudence or reticence.

"My dear," she cried, taking Angela by both hands when the latter came to wish her good-night, "you are a positive enchantress. Ernest isn't the same creature that he was a few hours ago. You won't abandon the good work, now that you have begun it, will you?"

"Your son has kindly promised to look in upon me at tea-time to-morrow," Mrs. Rowe answered, with a demure smile. "I hope you will recognise my having asked him as an effort to carry on what you are pleased to call the good work."

"Oh, how dear of you!" Lady Helen exclaimed.

Mr. Glyn, ponderously jocular, remarked that, upon his word, Ernest was a lucky dog, and that a touch of fever was a small price to pay for the indulgence of being restored to England, home, and—er—beauty. Mr. Doddridge and the other bystanders looked benevolently amused; the young man himself wore a slightly embarrassed air; the whole scene had rather too much the effect of a public and deliberate intimation to be pleasant. Angela, however, as she was driven homeward, felt no qualms of conscience, and only a passing sensation of personal disgust. It is impossible to think of everybody and everything at one and the same moment; the chief aim that she had in her mind's

eye was to serve Barbara Vale, and in the prosecution of that aim some annoyances must be submitted to.

Ernest, meanwhile, withdrew somewhat ungraciously from premature parental felicitations and betook himself to the smoking-room, where he began to wonder whether he was or was not as lucky as he had been pronounced. Mrs. Rowe was "awfully nice," though you could not call her pretty, and seven thousand a year—or was it ten? some people said it must be nearly ten—was not a thing to be sneezed at; yet—well, it was not all roses. He remembered a certain afternoon in June, and sighed regretfully. Not that he accused himself of infidelity, for infidelity in such cases is, when you come to think of it, next door to a virtue; but he really had been very fond of his Barbara—quite desperately fond of her!—and meeting her again under the altered circumstances which he foresaw would be, to say the least of it, awkward. Possibly she would have the tact and good feeling to go away; there was, he had understood, some talk of her going away. In any case, she could not blame him for acting as he had almost made up his mind to act. He had written to her before sailing for South America, and had received no reply; which was tantamount to the expression of a wish on her part that all should be at an end between them. And, indeed, considering that he had no money, while she had a husband and a couple of children—

The young man concluded his soliloquy with an expressive shrug, threw away the end of his cigarette, and went up to bed, with every prospect of sleeping soundly. Not to everybody is it given to be a philosopher; but profound egotism is attainable by most of us, and that does very nearly as well.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE OBLIGATIONS OF FRIENDSHIP

THE Vicar of Glyn, with that swift, gliding gait which characterizes clerics of all denominations, was going his rounds through the parish when he caught sight of George Hallett outside the forge, and paused to wish him good-morning. He had an affection for George, who, though not much of a Churchman, was a good friend to the poor, and a liberal supporter of such recreations as could be provided to relieve the monotony of their lives; while George, on his side, respected Mr. Doddridge as a hard worker and a very good sort of fellow, for a parson. Therefore they were wont to greet one another cordially when they met.

"I'm just having this horse's shoes put on the right way," George explained; "they wouldn't be put on the right way if I didn't see to it myself. It's a most extraordinary thing," he continued impressively, "but, if you'll believe me, there isn't one solitary blacksmith in the county who can or will carry out the simplest instructions unless you stand over him. What I maintain, and what they won't understand, is that you can no more make a horse fit a given set of shoes than you can force your own feet to fit a pair of ready-made boots."

Technical elucidation followed, to which Mr. Doddridge, who, as a matter of fact, always wore ready-made boots and was wholly ignorant of the craft of farriery, lent a patient ear. Presently, in the innocence of his soul and with no other intention than to change the subject, he remarked:

"We had a very pleasant little dinner at the Place last night; I thought perhaps you would have been there. It really looks as if the match was going to come off."

"What match are you talking about?" George inquired, sternly and ominously calm.

"Oh, don't you know?" the other smilingly returned (for he himself was a busy, benevolent saint, who, as Lady Helen was wont affectionately to lecture, "never knew anything about anything"); "I thought it was notorious that young Glyn has his eye upon our dear Mrs. Rowe. Well, I am sure he could not make a wiser choice, and I have always felt that she is not fitted by temperament or circumstances to live alone. His parents, too, are evidently in favour of an alliance which has so much to recommend it."

"Devil take them!" cried George. And then: "I beg your pardon; it isn't the proper thing, I believe, to mention the devil in the presence of his professional opponents. What I ought to have said was that I, at any rate, don't doubt them. So your idea is that Mrs. Rowe intends to oblige that rather despicable youth and his greedy father and mother, eh?"

Mr. Doddridge looked distressed. "Would you really call him despicable and them greedy? I hope Mrs. Rowe doesn't agree with you; and, after what I saw last night, I may almost venture to say that I am sure she does not. Why should not the young fellow admire her for her own sake? It seems to me

the most natural thing in the world that he should. And as for Mr. Glyn and Lady Helen, they may surely, without incurring the stigma of being greedy or grasping, be allowed to prefer a rich daughter-in-law to a poor one."

"All right; they aren't anything that they oughtn't to be, then," returned George impatiently. "What did you see last night?"

Mr. Doddridge, while earnestly repudiating the character of a gossip or an eavesdropper, described what he had seen. It was not, to be sure, conclusive; but it certainly appeared to justify the impression which he and others had formed, and it caused his hearer to forget all about the business immediately in hand. Thus it came to pass that an opinionated smith took his own way, unmolested, and that Mr. Hallett, some days later, had to leave the hounds in the middle of a run, owing to the disagreeable discovery that his horse had dropped dead lame behind. But perhaps, even if he had foreseen that destined catastrophe, George would not have cared, threatened as he—or rather Mrs. Rowe—was by a catastrophe so infinitely greater.

It was indeed on Angela's account, not on his own, that he was dismayed. That she would never care for him as a wife ought to care for her husband, that she would hardly be persuaded to marry him without caring for him in that way (though she might possibly be persuaded to marry somebody else), that he, for his part, could not ask her to do such a thing, were she amenable to pressure—these were hard facts with which he was mentally familiar, and which he recapitulated on the homeward path, after taking leave of guileless Mr. Doddridge. But at least he had such influence with her as honest and acknowledged friend-

ship may plead; at least, if he had no right of veto over her actions, he might claim that of humble remonstrance; at least she could not quarrel with him for trying to restrain her from dashing her head against a stone wall. She was a good deal less likely to quarrel with him than he was to quarrel with her; but he was far from realizing that somewhat obvious truth, and a day spent chiefly in ruminating upon his duty to his neighbour ended by landing him, about sundown, at the door of Brayton Lodge.

The assurance which he received from Mrs. Rowe's own lips, when he had been ushered into a warm, dimly lighted library, that she was delighted to see him was, he feared, only a polite figure of speech. At any rate, he felt quite unable to respond in an equally amicable spirit; for, sprawling beside the tea-table, with his long legs stretched out before him, was a third person whom he was anything but delighted to see. To find himself confronted by the very man whom he had come to denounce was indeed an inauspicious start.

"I thought," he could not help saying rather gruffly, "that you were supposed to be on the sick list. Isn't it rather imprudent of you to turn out on such a cold evening as this?"

"Bless your soul, my dear chap," returned Ernest Glyn good-humouredly, "you don't imagine that I was allowed to walk here, do you? I came in a fur coat and a brougham, and I shall be carried back again with every precaution presently."

"The sooner the better," thought George, who, however, limited himself to an inarticulate rejoinder.

"Why do you snort like that, Hallett?" the young man plaintively inquired. "If you suggest incredulity, you are mistaken, as well as unfeeling; for I am



genuinely and wretchedly seedy. Of course if you only mean that I am in the way, that's different. All I can say is that I'll get out of the way as soon as I'm called for; I can't go until then; it would be as much as my life is worth."

He was a very irritating young man, and not the least irritating thing about him was his evident immunity from the jealousy with which he appeared to credit the intruder. For the next quarter of an hour he amused himself almost without disguise at the expense of George Hallett, who, being stolidly determined to sit him out and inwardly enraged by his impertinence, did not get the best of an intermittent sparring-match which Mrs. Rowe was powerless to check. The upshot was that when the diplomatist took his departure, he had achieved one of those successes upon which diplomacy specially prides itself, inasmuch as he left behind him a pair of allies who were by no means pleased with one another.

"I must say," exclaimed George, as soon as the field was clear, "that I am astonished at you. I never should have believed, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, that you would go on as you have been doing with *that* fellow, of all men in the world."

"Since you are so candid," returned Angela composedly, but with a slightly heightened colour, "I need not hesitate to confess that I am astonished at you, and that I should not, unless I had seen it with my own eyes, have believed that you would be so deliberately, unprovokedly rude to a guest of mine."

"I wasn't half as rude as I should have liked to be," George impenitently declared.

"So I gathered from your manners. I am not sure that I quite understand what is implied by an accusation of 'going on,' but——"

"Oh, you understand well enough," interrupted the irate George. "So do I, and so—confound him!—does he. You looked at him just now, when he was saying good-bye and hanging on to your hand, in a way—well, it's open to you to advise me to mind my own business; only I do feel, rightly or wrongly, that it is my business to warn you what the man is after. How you can doubt that he is paying his addresses to your banking account, not to you, is a mystery to me."

Angela laughed. "You don't think it necessary to flatter either my vanity or my intelligence," she observed; "still I daresay your intentions are good."

"They are; and his, you may depend upon it, are not. Why, it was only the other day that he was making a fool of himself with that silly little Vale woman."

"You forget that the silly little Vale woman, as you call her, is a friend of mine. Perhaps it would be rather safer for us not to talk any more about my friends. Suppose we discuss hunting prospects instead? Then we shall run no risk of falling out."

But George did not care to be treated as a man whose opinion was worth having upon one subject only; nor was he accustomed to being snubbed by Angela Rowe, who indeed was not addicted to snubbing anybody. He jumped up and returned, rather roughly:

"We shall run even less risk if we discuss nothing at all; so I will wish you good-evening. I suppose it would sound civil if I were to apologize, but I am not going to apologize. I still think that you are on the high-road to an act of suicidal folly, and I still think that the least I could do was to throw up my

arms, on the chance of making you swerve. It is true, to be sure, that I tried that once before and failed. If you have no regrets, why—there's no more to be said."

"I think a little too much has been said already," answered Angela gravely. For the truth was that, admirable though her devotion to her late husband had been, she had experienced occasional inevitable regrets, and George's allusion struck her as an ungenerous one. Therefore she did not attempt to detain him, and he went his way, dolefully conscious of having failed this time, after an even more signal fashion than in years gone by.

Nevertheless, he was no sooner out of the house than Angela's conscience began to reproach her. Was it, after all, fair or worth while, she asked herself, to dismiss this faithful friend of hers under a misapprehension which could not but distress him, and which might cost her his respect as well as his friendship? A few words would have enlightened him, and, perhaps, it was not yet too late to say those few words. It would not be too late if she were at once to snatch up a cloak and run across the park to a certain wicket gate opening upon the high-road, which he must pass; only she must act upon the impulse of the moment or abstain from taking any action at all. It is needless to say that she chose the alternative which always commends itself to her sex, and thus George, tramping along the muddy highway in the dark, was arrested on a sudden by a breathless lady, who announced somewhat superfluously that she had pursued him.

"Upon second thoughts," said she, "I don't want you to set me down as an absolute idiot; and since you won't apologize, I suppose I must. I ought not to have let you imagine that I was offended by what

you said. I am not a bit offended, and please believe that nothing is further from my mind than marrying Mr. Ernest Glyn."

"And you ran after me to tell me so!" cried her astonished and overjoyed hearer. "By Jove, this is good of you! But then——"

She answered the question which he did not formulate by another. "Can't you guess why? I should have thought you could. It is not very pleasant to have to put things in plain language; but you know that Barbara Vale is a friend of mine, and you know that young Mr. Glyn's reappearance is, or might have been, a rather unfortunate incident for her. Now do you understand?"

"Yes," answered George slowly, "I believe I understand."

"But the tone of your voice implies that you don't approve. Well, I am sorry for that; yet, if you will think of it, the young man well deserves any little disappointment that may be in store for him. As you yourself declared just now, there cannot be the slightest doubt that he is courting my money, not my unattractive person, and——"

"God forbid," interrupted George, "that I should ever tell such a lie as to call you unattractive!"

"I should have pardoned you if you had told that undeniable truth. Anyhow, my person has no attractions for Mr. Ernest Glyn, and, as he is doing his best to deceive me, I consider that I am justified in practising some deception upon him. You, I am afraid, don't consider that justifiable."

"Oh, yes, I do," answered George; "I daresay it's all right. He is fair game, and I'm sure I don't care whether he is humbugged or not. Mrs. Vale may be worth saving from herself, too, for anything

that I know to the contrary. Only I can't help wishing that the job could have been intrusted to any other woman than you. You see, one doesn't, generally speaking, expect women to be straight; one knows they aren't. But I have always looked upon you as a bright exception to the rule; I have always thought you as scrupulously honourable as any man on the face of the earth, and a good deal more so than the average man."

"That," observed Mrs. Rowe in a low voice, "is a very hard thing to say."

"I didn't mean it to be hard," George eagerly protested; "I was only trying to explain how I feel about it."

"Ah, your feeling is that of a gentleman and a man of honour; it requires no explanation. Mine is necessarily more complicated; I have to violate the first principles of morality by doing evil that good may come. For several reasons I think, as I say, that I am justified; what seems to me hard is that I must forfeit your good opinion."

"But, of course, you haven't forfeited my good opinion, whatever that may be worth. I admire you all the more for undertaking what I know you can't like in order to serve people who aren't fit to black your boots. Do you really care so much for my admiration and respect, though?"

"I don't think," she answered quietly, "there are many things I care for more."

She said this because it was the truth and because she was moved by his evident earnestness; but it was not a very prudent thing to say, and she wished that she had held her tongue, when he abruptly seized her by both hands, exclaiming, "Angela!"

"Oh, please don't!" she hurriedly entreated. "I

‘am so sorry. I can’t tell you how sorry I am; but please don’t go on.”

“I won’t go on, then; I don’t want to distress you. But you know how it is with me. You know how it has been with me all these years, and that I couldn’t have changed even if I had wished to change—which I haven’t.”

“Yes, I know,” she answered sorrowfully; “I wish I didn’t know; I wish you could see me as other people see me and as I really am; I wish still more that I could care for you in—in a different way. But wishing is no good, and impossibilities must remain impossible, whether one tries to shut one’s eyes to them or not.”

George sighed. That it was impossible for Angela to fall in love with him he believed; yet he could not and did not believe that she had ever loved Rowe, a soured, fractious valetudinarian, whom she had nevertheless married. Pleas and representations of a forlorn, somewhat ignoble nature were struggling within him for utterance and caused him to retain his hold of her hands while a gig, with flashing lamps, was driven rapidly along the road, on the margin of which the couple had stationed themselves. He did not, in his preoccupied condition, recognise the driver of this vehicle, who, however, not only recognised him and Mrs. Rowe, but half raised his elbow, as though in doubt whether or not the occasion was one of those which call for the omission of customary salutes.

“Now we are done for!” Angela exclaimed, freeing herself and laughing constrainedly. “Mr. Asher will tell everybody that he has surprised us after dark in a distinctly compromising attitude.”

But the last thing that Mr. Asher contemplated was to publish abroad what he had witnessed with

extreme displeasure and chagrin. While George Hallett was vowing to punch his head for him in the event of his ever daring to breathe a syllable which could cause annoyance to Mrs. Rowe, he was saying to himself that he was not the born fool some people appeared to take him for, and no sooner had he reached home than he strode into his wife's boudoir with the abrupt and decisive announcement of:

"Isabella, I have made up my mind; I am going to accept the mastership."

"Then," returned Mrs. Asher tranquilly, "you are going to be a trifle previous, my good Reuben. Master or no master, you won't prevail upon me to spend the winter here until Lady Mount-Sorrel climbs down."

"But, hang it all! she has called, hasn't she?"

"She has left cards, as I told you, without asking whether I was at home or not. That isn't enough. We must be invited to dinner, and the county must be invited to meet us."

"Get somebody to make the Mount-Sorrels invite us, then. I don't suppose they will give us a particularly good dinner, and I don't suppose we shall meet half as many great people in it as you can secure for your own entertainments in London as often as you choose. You have no sense of proportion, Isabella, though I will say for you that you are a clever woman."

"To what discovery on your part," inquired Mrs. Asher, "am I indebted for that compliment?"

"To the discovery that you were quite right about Mrs. Rowe and Hallett. They will be an engaged couple before we know where we are; and that is why I shall inform the committee at once that I am prepared to assume the sole mastership on the opening day."

"Oh, that's it, is it? Well, I don't think it will be a very wise move."

"It is the move that you advised, anyhow."

"No, I didn't advise it; I only pointed out that taking the hounds without more ado would be one way of putting your Trentshire friends' noses out of joint. I am afraid you may find it a rather expensive way."

"Expense be bothered!" growled Mr. Asher.

"With all my heart! Only don't blame me if they accept as much as they can get out of you and give as little as they can in return. Personally, I don't care whether you spend the whole winter at Beaulieu or not, so long as I am not expected to do the same; and I certainly shall not remain here unless Lady Mount-Sorrel behaves decently to me."

Mr. Asher took Heaven to witness that the perverse, insatiable vanity of women is the root of all social evils. He also declared that, although he was pretty well off, he really could not afford to burn the candle at both ends. Nevertheless, he wrote and despatched his missive to the Hunt Committee. Some risk he must needs incur, and no risk could be more distasteful to him than that of seeing himself supplanted by the man who had already, in numerous small ways, compelled him to play second fiddle.



## CHAPTER XV

### SICKNESS AND OTHER ADVERSITY

"I AM so sorry to interrupt you, Mrs. Vale," said Miss Beamish, slowly opening the door of her employer's private sitting-room one morning and thrusting an apologetic face through the aperture; "I know how you hate to be disturbed when you are writing letters; but——"

"I hate a thorough draught even more," interrupted Barbara, who was not writing letters, although she had a pen in her hand, and whose fretful voice gave little encouragement to a bearer of evil tidings. "Please come in and shut the door behind you. What is the matter now?"

The matter was that Dicky, who had been out of sorts for some days past, had broken out into a suspicious rash, and Miss Beamish was afraid there could no longer be any doubt that he was "sickening for something." She ventured to suggest that Dr. Sewell should be sent for without delay.

Barbara threw up her hands with a dismayed gesture. "Scarlet-fever, of course. This only was wanting. Was ever such luck as mine!" she exclaimed.

Miss Beamish soothingly hoped that it might prove to be nothing worse than measles.

"My dear woman," returned Barbara, "measles won't console me. Less dangerous, perhaps, but quite as inconvenient. One must expect to be treated as a leper for the next six weeks, whatever it may be."

Miss Beamish had a right to look shocked, and availed herself of that right; yet Barbara was not in reality so much more selfish than other people. It is true that her first thoughts (which were apt to find expression in her first words) were almost always for herself; but second thoughts followed rapidly upon their heels; and these, in the present instance, were of a nature entirely creditable to her maternal instincts. She hurried upstairs to examine the small sufferer, who had been put to bed; she made him comfortable, caressed and cheered him to the admiration of the perturbed bystanders, and only left his side for a few minutes in order to return to her writing-table and scribble a hasty summons to the doctor. Why, after an instant of hesitation, did she decide to indite a second summons and give orders that the groom should proceed with it to Brayton Lodge? This did not, under the circumstances, seem a very considerate thing to do; but the circumstances, like the writer's motives, were somewhat complicated, and there was not much time for consideration.

"Well, I was going to write to her, anyhow, and I have told her the truth," Barbara pleaded, in response to an imaginary accuser; "she needn't come if she has the least fear of infection."

The imaginary accuser made an unpleasant retort and had to be stifled. Real and articulate accusers might possibly at some subsequent date impute to Mrs. Vale the ignoble determination that, if she were to be sent to Coventry, Angela Rowe should be sent

thither too; but it was needless to anticipate a charge so utterly unjust. That Angela would be deterred from coming by dread of infection was unlikely, to be sure; still, the risk was infinitesimal, and a note would have been despatched to Brayton Lodge that morning, whether Dicky had been ill or well. Rumours had reached Barbara's ears which, coupled with Ernest Glyn's inexplicable silence, seemed to call for investigation, unworthy though they might be of a moment's serious belief. Suspense, moreover, was becoming intolerable and could be dispelled by Angela; for it was at least an ascertained fact that she had been more than once at Glyn Place since the return of the ailing diplomatist.

Angela Rowe drove up to the door in advance of the doctor, who had started on his rounds before Mrs. Vale's message could be delivered. She was greatly concerned at the news of her friend Dicky's illness, and begged at once that she might be allowed to help in nursing him.

"Of course you won't be allowed to go near him if he has anything catching," returned Barbara, who had descended from the child's bedroom on hearing the sound of wheels; "but we can't tell what is wrong until that tiresome old Sewell chooses to turn up. Why are doctors invariably out when one wants them? I can't help thinking that it is a sort of professional *pose*, and that they would rather go tearing about the country aimlessly in a dogcart than be suspected of having no work to do. Is Dr. Sewell the sort of person who would make a point of being at home for luncheon, I wonder?"

"I should think," answered Angela, "that he is the sort of person who would be not at all unlikely to dine in the middle of the day; in which case there

will be the less chance of his keeping you waiting. May I stay here until he comes?"

"It will be so good of you if you will. I am horribly upset about poor Dicky, and—and about other things."

"Are there other things into the bargain?"

"As if you didn't know that there must be! I have been afraid to put my nose outside the gates lest I should meet Ernest Glyn, and yet it seems too absurd to let him imprison me."

"I am sure he cannot wish to do that."

"How can you be sure? Did he tell you so? Has he spoken to you about me?"

"I was asked to meet him at dinner one evening, and he inquired how you were," Angela made truthful reply; "but he did not seem to be quite so anxious about your health as about his own. He is not malingering; he has had an authentic attack of fever, and he is full of pity for himself."

"Poor boy!"

"Yes; but there is no occasion for alarm. At his age one recovers quickly from maladies—of all kinds."

"Angela, you *have* been talking to him about me!"

"Indeed I have not; your name, as far as I can remember, has only been mentioned between us on that one occasion, although I have seen a good deal of the young man since, and he has been flatteringly confidential. I quite hope and believe that he won't bother you any more."

Barbara reddened with vexation. "He *never* bothered me," she declared. "Of course he distressed me a little by going on as he did; but——"

"But not by going off as he did. You were glad when he went away and sorry when you heard that

he was coming back. Surely you are not sorry to hear of his having come back a changed man!"

"I should certainly be sorry to hear of his having changed in such a very short time," Barbara returned, with a hint of defiance in her voice; "I should think it quite disgusting of him if I believed it. But I don't."

"Oh, if you don't believe what I say!"

"There are things which it is impossible to believe of anybody for whom one has an atom of liking or respect. It would take a good deal, for instance, to make me believe the preposterous report which has been circulated by some of the good-natured people hereabout that he is paying his addresses to you, and that you are leading him on."

Angela did not wish her friend to believe that, although she did very much wish to convince her that young Glyn was a faithless swain. "At my age, and with a face like mine, it isn't necessary to contradict such reports," she calmly observed.

"I don't suppose that age or beauty would have much to do with it," said Barbara, too chagrined to waste time and words upon civility: "the question is whether you can truthfully contradict the report."

It was an embarrassing question, to which Mrs. Rowe, being a truthful woman, had no reply ready. To make a truthful reply would obviously be disastrous; for she knew Barbara well enough to foresee that the young man would be at once pardoned for harbouring mercenary projects. On the other hand, a direct lie, apart from the repugnance with which it inspired her, would be worse than useless, inasmuch as it would assuredly be followed by more or less speedy detection. Thus situated, there was nothing for her to do save to equivocate, and she was about

to essay that difficult enterprise when Dr. Sewell arrived, like a god out of a machine, to preserve her from undignified flounderings.

The doctor was an old friend of Angela Rowe's. After he had been conducted upstairs by Barbara to inspect his patient, and after he had been absent some twenty minutes, he returned alone, and said:

"Well, if you will be advised by me, you will get out of this as quickly as you can."

"Then it is something serious?" Angela asked.

"It is scarlatina, if you call that serious; and I suspect that the little girl is also in for it. At the present stage I can conscientiously warrant you safe; but I should hardly venture to grant you a clean bill of health if you were to stay for a few days in the house, as I understand that you have offered to do."

"Oh, I shall certainly stay," answered Angela, without a moment's hesitation. "I have had scarlet-fever already, as you know."

"Yes, I remember it very well; it seems only the other day. How time runs on, to be sure! The chances, of course, are against your taking the disease a second time; still you may take it; and, frankly, I don't think Mrs. Vale has any business to expose you to the risk."

"I shall be only too grateful to her if she will allow me to be of some service to her and Dicky. Did she express any wish that I should?"

Dr. Sewell shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, the strongest. She made a point of it, and vowed that you would be hurt if you were dismissed in favour of a trained nurse. There will have to be a trained nurse all the same, and I don't myself see that there can be any use in or excuse for putting you to so much inconvenience."

"That is because you don't realize the comfort of having a friend at your elbow."

"H'm! I wonder whether you realize the discomfort of having a rather exacting one at yours; not to mention certain unavoidable deprivations. No hunting for you, at this rate, until after the turn of the year, nor any social intercourse either. Is it—pardon me for putting the thing plainly, but I know your passion for self-sacrifice—is it good enough? Will this whimsical little lady, to whom you so absurdly talk of being grateful, ever appreciate what you propose to do and give up for her?"

"Whatever I may do or give up will be done, or done without, for my own personal satisfaction," Angela declared. "I want no thanks and deserve none."

Thanks she perhaps deserved, and very effusive thanks she received from Barbara when her determination was made known. Whether she deserved the half-indignant commiseration of Dr. Sewell is another question; for, as a matter of fact, the turn which events had taken struck her as singularly fortunate and opportune. For the next six weeks, at any rate, Ernest Glyn might be regarded as a negligible factor, debarred alike from resuming relations with the old love and the new, and that was, from every point of view, a substantial gain. So, no doubt, Barbara thought, and a desire that her suspected supplanter should share her seclusion was very possibly at the bottom of Barbara's eagerness for an arrangement which might appear a little uncalled-for to outsiders; but really Barbara's sentiments did not very much signify. The main thing was to avert premature climaxes and to keep the situation as it stood until Denis should return. His return was not unlikely to

be accelerated by the child's illness, of which he would be duly apprised by Miss Beamish; still he could not, in any case, be at home much before Christmas. Ere that time the amount of sick-leave accorded by the Foreign Office to Ernest Glyn would surely be approaching exhaustion.

The non-appearance of Mrs. Rowe at the opening meet was a source of sincere regret to her many friends and of some little disappointment to herself; yet it cannot be said that she was unhappy during the weeks that she spent at Southacre in tending her two little patients; for Di, as the doctor had anticipated, speedily followed Dicky's lead. Women, it is generally supposed, enjoy nursing the sick. Perhaps the best sort of women do; certainly Angela Rowe did, and certainly Barbara, herself no great adept in the art, derived much solace and support from the company of this quiet, capable friend.

"I can't think what I should have done without you," she gratefully exclaimed again and again.

One thing she would in all probability have done, and that was to grant an interview to Ernest Glyn, who, like other neighbours, called repeatedly to the door to inquire, and, unlike them, clamoured for the admittance which, by Angela's orders, was sternly refused to him. It was always for Mrs. Rowe that he asked on these occasions; but that was an unreported detail. Barbara, pleased at the sight of his frequent cards, pronounced him foolish, but nice, and charged the butler with messages for him of which it was to be hoped that he appreciated the significance. She said, "He is really too great a goose for anything!" and Angela agreed that he was. They did not discuss him much or often.

The children were both of them ill enough to



require pretty constant attention, but at no time, happily, so ill as to be in actual danger. Throughout some few days and nights of anxiety, and a large number which she might have been expected to find tedious, Barbara behaved as well as possible and earned the esteem, in addition to the affection, of her more efficient coadjutrix. Her heart, after all, was evidently in the right place; she cared for her children, perhaps also (though she did not choose to acknowledge it) for her husband; the moment seemed to be at hand for breathing a cautious word or two on behalf of that absent, ill-used person. When the stage of convalescence had been reached, Angela was at length persuaded to allow herself those daily doses of fresh air which she had forced upon her companion from the outset, and thus it was that, being driven back to the house by a sudden shower, one December afternoon, she made a vexatious and rather humiliating discovery.

Seated close together in front of the library fire were Barbara and Ernest Glyn, who, on the intruder's abrupt entrance, jumped apart and became ridiculously red in the face. There was a brief dramatic pause, which one of them concluded by breaking out into a peal of embarrassed laughter. It was not the young man who indulged in this misplaced merriment. He looked, on the contrary, much more inclined to cry, and murmured, with pathetic inaptitude, "We didn't think you would be back so soon."

"That I can well believe," returned Angela dryly. "Mr. Glyn, will you be so good as to go away at once, please? I will take it upon myself to say that you will not be allowed in this house again, and I have no doubt that when Mr. Vale returns, Dr. Sewell

will consider it his duty to report the servants who have disobeyed his strict injunctions."

"It wasn't the servants," pleaded Barbara, still laughing a little; "I let him in myself through the window."

"Then, for goodness' sake," cried the exasperated Angela, "let him get out through the window, and be quick about it. How long has this been going on, I wonder?"

"Only yesterday and to-day, I give you my word," Ernest began eagerly; "and really, you know——"

But Mrs. Rowe threw up the sash and, somehow or other, he found himself on the cold side of it with an unfinished sentence upon his lips.

"I am glad he has no umbrella," she vindictively remarked, after thus ejecting him from the premises; "a thorough wetting will serve him right and do him good. Barbara, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"I don't believe there can be the slightest danger in my seeing him," Barbara returned. "I always change my clothes after leaving the children, which is more than Dr. Sewell does. People are too idiotic about infection."

"I wasn't thinking about the idiocy of people in general. Of course there is some risk of infection, but that is a small matter in comparison with the risk that you run by admitting that youth surreptitiously. What put it into your head to do such an imprudent thing?"

"My dear Angela, you would have done it yourself if you had seen him standing outside on the gravel and making mute, woebegone signals. Hard as your heart is, you couldn't have resisted him. I did resist him at first; I only made responsive signals."

"I can imagine them. You kissed your hand, no doubt."

"Indeed I did not; it was he who kissed my hand."

"Through the glass?"

"Oh, naturally I opened the window and put my hand out to him, merely meaning him to shake it. But he went farther—or rather he came farther before he could be stopped. That was yesterday afternoon. I didn't tell you, because I knew what a fuss you would make; but no harm whatever has been done, and the poor boy has been given some pleasant moments which I don't think you need grudge him."

Barbara was radiant. There was some economy of veracity in her account of the fashion after which Ernest Glyn had effected his invasion of forbidden territory; but it was a fact that she had bestowed some pleasant moments upon him, and that he had shown every sign of appreciating them. She was no longer jealous of her protecting dragon; he had explained away (how could he do otherwise, when taxed with sordid infidelity?) such grounds as she had had for incipient jealousy, and she bowed good-humouredly enough to Angela's stern decree that there must be no renewal of clandestine and perilous meetings. It was obvious that nothing was to be gained by upbraiding her, and almost equally obvious that to exact pledges of future good conduct from her would be a waste of time. She would assuredly, under pressure of temptation, break her promises, and would, if detected in the breach, point out that she was not at all to blame. Meanwhile, she volunteered the information that she was not, and never had been, enamoured of her admirer, sincerely sorry though she could not

help feeling for him. She might or might not be speaking the truth, Angela thought. What was indispensable, for the time being, and not very difficult, was to keep her under constant supervision; the problem of how to shield her from the consequences of her own incurable frivolity would present itself at a later period, when the doctor should liberate the household from quarantine.

This problem postponed itself in a somewhat alarming manner the very next day, by an attack of violent headache and sickness which caused Dr. Sewell to order Mrs. Vale promptly to bed, and within forty-eight hours all doubt as to the nature of her malady was at an end. She had contracted in a very severe form the disease from which her children had well-nigh recovered; so serious, indeed, did her condition soon become, that a summoning telegram was, by her medical attendant's advice, despatched to Mr. Vale at Aden.

"The worst of it is," sighed Miss Beamish, "that there is no knowing when or where news may reach him. I write to Aden every week, as he told me to do; but letters are only forwarded, I believe, as occasion serves, and whether he is in the desert or in some impenetrable forest at this moment I have no idea. I am afraid he can't be in the neighbourhood of a telegraph station, or we should have had some inquiry about the children from him before now."

"I suppose we shall," Angela agreed. "Well, we can do no more than we have done, and perhaps it will be just as well if this telegram can't be delivered at once. We shall be able, I hope, to follow it up by a reassuring one in a day or two."

But they were not able to do that; for Barbara went from bad to worse, and the doctor ended by

stating bluntly that he thought her more likely to succumb than to recover.

"You had better not let Mr. Vale know that I say so, though," he added; "long before he can arrive in England the question will have been settled, one way or the other, and there is no use in distressing him."

## CHAPTER XVI

### MRS. ASHER ON THE WAR-PATH

THAT the legitimate fox-hunting season should open with a lawn meet at Beaulieu, the residence of the new master, was only in accordance with the obvious fitness of things, and the new master's wife, who had assembled a large house party in honour of the occasion, gave the instructions which it demanded to her *chef*. Fain would she have issued corresponding instructions to the county, and what could be done by means of invitation cards was duly done; but the county, alas!—at any rate, the female portion thereof—preferred to sit outside in its equipages under a leaden sky and brave the rigours of a chilly climate. Trentshire, still a little doubtful about the Ashers, was shy of committing itself. Lady Mount-Sorrel was not present to give her neighbours a lead, and Lady Helen Glyn, who might have been more accommodating, protested that her weak digestion would not allow her to partake of a meal which was neither breakfast nor luncheon. Mrs. Asher, wrapped in a priceless sable-tail cloak, tripped out from the house to make a personal appeal to her, but was gently repelled.

“So kind of you,” Lady Helen responded, from the heavy, old-fashioned barouche in which she was

seated. "No, really I dare not eat or drink at this hour of the day. It is quite different, of course, for the gentlemen, who have hours of hard exercise before them."

The gentlemen indeed had needed no pressure; only their willingness to be refreshed could not, unfortunately, be construed as implying anything more than that they knew what was good.

"It is too bad of you all," Mrs. Asher declared, with a sprightly mien, but with rage at her heart, "to draw a cordon round us in this way, as though we were infectious. I believe you would have accepted the hospitality of Southacre if it had been offered you, though that house really *is* dangerous, with its scarlet-fever."

"I assure you that not one of us would dream of doing anything so foolhardy," Lady Helen emphatically rejoined. "I say not one of us, because my poor Ernest is not here, and because I am no more than half afraid that he may be there. Nothing that I can urge or do will keep him away from the place; it is a positive infatuation. Our dear Angela Rowe, as I daresay you have heard, insists upon staying there and helping to nurse the children, who surely, one would think, ought to be independent of amateur nursing. Most admirable and courageous of her, but rather selfish of Barbara Vale, it seems to me."

Lady Helen deemed it desirable that as many people as possible should be made aware of Ernest's devotion to the rich widow. She spoke in a loud voice, and Mrs. Asher, who was out of temper, returned, not less audibly:

"Where does the selfishness come in? Is it to her accepting Mrs. Rowe's services or to her admitting your son that you object? After all, he may not be

exposing himself so recklessly for Mrs. Rowe's sake, you know."

The speech was a spiteful and a rather imprudent one; but it was meant to be the former, while Mrs. Asher did not greatly care whether it was the latter or not. Lady Helen, who ought to have been lending support to a neighbour, but who saw fit to hold aloof, deserved a slap in the face: as for the danger of affronting her, that might be despised; for, when all was said, she scarcely counted in a social sense. Now, as always, the one thing needful was Lady Mount-Sorrel's recognition, which would assuredly entail that of Lady Helen Glyn and other minor lights.

Partially consoled by this reflection, yet not unmindful of what she had been told, Mrs. Asher returned to the dining-room, where George Hallett, in a stained red coat, was surveying with somewhat disdainful eyes the excesses of his fellow-sportsmen. To him she could not deny herself the pleasure of remarking: "I suppose you have never had scarlet-fever, Mr. Hallett."

"Scarlet-fever?" George returned, wondering what the woman was driving at; "oh, yes; I had it when I was at school. What of that?"

"Only that, unless you were in fear of catching it a second time, you should not have allowed the enemy to steal a march upon you. Young Mr. Glyn defies all perils—so, at least, his mother says—by daily visits to Southacre. It is true that in doing so he debars himself from sport, for it would be inexcusable of him to scatter microbes broadcast about the hunting-field, and perhaps that is why you have refrained from imitating him; but what will Mrs. Rowe think of you for clinging to your scarlet coat, rather than take your chance of earning a scarlet skin?"



That portion of George Hallett's skin which covered his cheek-bones and his ears assumed something of the hue alluded to. "Really, I don't quite understand what you are talking about, Mrs. Asher," said he.

"Oh, but I think you understand very well. And I should be sorry for you if I did not feel that you deserve your little share of discomfiture. How you must be laughing at me in your sleeve this morning!"

"I assure you," answered George gruffly, "that I never felt less inclined to laugh in my life. All this gorging and guzzling isn't a particularly edifying or appropriate spectacle, but I see nothing to laugh at in it."

"Not even in the fact that it isn't being paid for? Payment, as you may remember, was promised. I was to have a certain reward in consideration of my husband's taking the hounds, and—here it is."

With a sweep of her hand she indicated the long table, at which the nobility, gentry, and yeomanry of Trentshire were regaling themselves. "Not a woman in the room, except those who are staying with us. Oh, don't trouble to make excuses. I dare say you can't help it; there are several things which you don't seem able to help. But possibly, after all, we are not the only people who have counted their chickens before they were hatched, and it doesn't strike me as an absolute certainty that you will be Reuben's successor, Mr. Hallett."

That little outburst made her feel rather better; yet she remained mortified and conscious of having been not only slighted but outwitted. Her male guests, to be sure, were as polite and cordial as could be desired, and many assurances did she receive from

them that her husband's public spirit and her own were fully appreciated; but she did not in the least wish to be a public benefactress, nor did she believe that one of these gentlemen really credited her with such a wish. They were delighted, of course, that sport was going to be provided for them free of expense; but they considered that their debt to the new master was adequately discharged by a few civil words, addressed to his wife, and by their acquiescence in the dignity which they doubtless thought him a great fool for having coveted.

Mr. Asher's first day of undisputed mastership was, happily for him, marred by no bitter reflections of that nature. The breakfast had appeared to him to be a complete success, and what was far more satisfactory than that was that it was followed by two entirely successful runs. There are, as we all know, days—not very many of them, still now and then a day—when everything goes well from start to finish, and one such now fell to the share of Reuben Asher, who thoroughly enjoyed it. The hounds, as luck would have it, were not long in finding; the field, at first unmanageably large and disposed to be noisy, was soon scattered and gave him no subsequent trouble; the huntsman (he had more than half expected him to be so) was not disrespectful, and he found that he could blow his horn (a point as to which he had suffered some nervous tremors) quite correctly. The carrying of that horn was in itself a joy to him and a symbol of realized ideals. A man, if he is to get through his allotted period of residence on the surface of the earth without intolerable weariness, must needs have an ambition of some sort or kind, and whether this take the form of a craving for wealth or for rank or for a plethora of ribbons and stars or

for a superlative collection of orchids, matters comparatively little to Reuben Asher, who had always longed to be master of a first-rate pack of fox-hounds, and who possessed but few qualifications for that post, rejoiced to think that he had not only obtained his heart's desire, but had inaugurated his reign in a style to which nobody could take exception. To have killed twice in the open, and on the second occasion after a run of forty minutes without a check, was no bad start. As he jogged homeward in the dusk, accompanied by two of his wife's smart friends, whom he had mounted and who were in high good-humour, he felt no doubt at all with regard to the question of whether life was worth living or not.

But the inevitable *amari aliquid* was in store for him. He had had a bath and a smoke, and was getting ready for dinner when Mrs. Asher rustled into his dressing-room, with clouds between her diamond tiara and her beautifully pencilled eyebrows, and——

"Reuben," said she, "does it occur to you that you have been sold?"

"Can't say it does," he wonderingly replied. "How sold?"

"Perhaps Mr. Hallett could tell you. You flatter yourself, I suppose, that you have cut him out."

"Well, it looks rather like it, doesn't it?" Mr. Asher returned, with a grin.

"It certainly looks as if his prospects of stepping into your shoes had not improved; but that is no thanks to you. That is simply because he has been foolish enough to let himself be cut out in another way by young Glyn, who is heroically devouring scarlet-fever germs at Mrs. Rowe's feet. *Your* folly consists in your having been in such a hurry to shove him on one side that you are now committed to keep-

ing the mastership through at least one season, whereas——”

“I shall keep it as long as there is a horse in the stables and a hound in the kennels; you may make up your mind to that, Isabella,” interrupted the new master in decisive accents.

“Whereas,” resumed Mrs. Asher imperturbably, “our stipulations have not been complied with, and, as far as I can see, are not in the least likely to be complied with. I was to all intents and purposes cut by the county this morning.”

“Rubbish! Why, they came here in their hundreds.”

“They came as far as the door, you mean. They wouldn’t cross the threshold—even Lady Helen Glyn wouldn’t—and they won’t until that obstinate old Mount-Sorrel woman gives them a lead. Which may be never, now that you have done what you were wanted to do, and that we have no inducements left to hold out.”

“Dash it all, Isabella! the old lady has called upon you; I can’t make her ask you to dinner.”

“I am quite aware that you can’t, Reuben; nor can you make me stay in this place if she doesn’t. I gave you fair warning from the first, remember.”

Mr. Asher groaned aloud. “Is it my fault that we haven’t been invited to Mount-Sorrel?”

“Since you ask me, I think it is a little your fault; but I am not reproaching you. All I say is that you have been sold.”

“Meaning, I presume, that *you* have been. Well, I’m sorry, Isabella; but I have done my utmost to oblige you. I have had a try at everybody in turn—the Glyns, Mrs. Rowe, the bishop, Mrs. Vale——”

“And they have proved to be so many broken

reeds. Quite so; and, as I said before, I am not reproaching you. Only you will have to convert this into a bachelor establishment for the remainder of the winter."

"All right," answered Mr. Asher sullenly; "there are worse things than a bachelor establishment, if it comes to that."

There are many worse things, and Mrs. Asher's presence on the domestic hearth did not precisely make for peace; only he had not yet—and she knew it—reached the point of accepting her departure for other scenes with equanimity. He thought her handsome, as indeed she was, and fascinating, which she may have been to some people. He did not relish the idea of her establishing herself on her own hearth for several months at Melton, or some such resort of gay and unprincipled youths. Divining his thoughts, she consoled herself during the evening for the chagrin of the day by behaving with her guests in a manner which she was well aware that he disliked. She made eyes at some of them, she whispered in the ears of a few, she proclaimed aloud her contempt for the deadly-lively society of Trentshire, and her determination to turn her back upon it. Yet every now and then she contrived to hint, for his benefit, that she would be prepared to tolerate Trentshire—at a price; and how could he help remembering that he still held one trump card in reserve? If anybody could extort the demanded invitation to dinner from Lady Mount-Sorrel, surely it was her grand-daughter, and he had it in his power to influence Lady Mount-Sorrel's grand-daughter by means of a very ugly threat. Why he had never utilized that power he himself could hardly have said, nor can the present chronicler attempt to explain. He was not a gentleman, he did

not pass for being overscrupulous, he rather disliked the Vales, to whom he was under no sort of obligation. Perhaps the part of an informer is one from which every human being who retains a shred of self-respect shrinks. Be that as it may, Reuben Asher doggedly and sulkily dismissed temptation. Isabella had chosen to pick a quarrel with him, although he had employed every effort to obtain for her the recognition of which she made a point; let her now deal with the situation for herself as best she might; she should not, at any rate, bully him into resigning the mastership of the North Trent Hounds.

Oddly enough, the method of dealing with the situation which commended itself to Mrs. Asher chanced to be that of securing Barbara Vale as an intermediary. She was, of course, ignorant of the pressure which might be brought to bear upon that imprudent lady, but she thought it probable that nobody was better equipped than Mrs. Vale for bringing pressure to bear upon Lady Mount-Sorrel, and, despite her loudly asserted indifference, she hated the notion of quitting Beaulieu a defeated woman. Opposition had whetted her appetite to such a degree that, rather than give in, she resolved to earn the gratitude of Southacre, as well as some share of the admiration which was accorded on all hands to Mrs. Rowe. Consequently, on the ensuing morning Mrs. Asher was driven up to the door of the infected establishment, bent upon effecting a heroic entrance, and even, if need should be, embracing the infected children. She might, and very likely would, be thought a fool and a nuisance for her pains; but it would be impossible to dispute her courage or to balk her of its legitimate reward.

The butler, to whom she addressed her sympathetic

inquiries, exhibited a long face. The children, he announced, were doing very well, and no anxiety was now felt about them; but he was sorry to say that his mistress was down with the fever, and that the doctor's opinion of her case was not at all favourable. No; he was sure that Mrs. Asher could be of no use, and that she ought not to enter the house. He would mention her kind wish, but he could not take upon himself to comply with it; he could not really.

Mrs. Asher, however, would take no denial. If she was not to be allowed to see the patient or the dear children, she must at least insist upon a few words with Mrs. Rowe; and, being a resolute person, she ended by getting her own way. Thus it came to pass that Ernest Glyn, sitting idly and despondently by the library fire, where he had been waiting all alone for the best part of an hour, was startled by the irruption of a fur-clad lady who apostrophized him after the fashion affected nowadays in the most refined circles.

"Hullo! Are you facing the music too, then? Awfully decent of you, I must say. I suppose you feel, as I do, that it would be pretty poor form to turn your back upon your pals when they're in a hole."

The young man shuddered visibly. He may even have intended his shudder to be visible; for, indeed, the intruder had no more right to describe herself as a "pal" of Barbara Vale's than she had to be where she was. However, he answered civilly enough:

"I don't think either you or I can do much to help our friends here just now, Mrs. Asher; and perhaps, under the present circumstances, the kindest thing you could do would be to turn your back upon them."

"Then why don't you turn yours?" Mrs. Asher pertinently inquired, while she took a chair.

"Oh, I'm in a rather exceptional position. I was allowed into the house some time ago; so that if anything had been going to happen to me, it would have happened before this. I must confess, all the same, that I am here to-day in defiance of Mrs. Rowe's orders, and I expect to catch it from her when she finds me."

"I'll stay and see you through," Mrs. Asher encouragingly promised. "Mrs. Rowe will turn up presently, no doubt, for I sent a message to her, and I daresay she won't slang you very severely before me. Especially as she must feel touched, unless she has a heart of stone, by your—what shall I call it?"

"You needn't call it anything," answered Ernest, beginning to lose patience; "I only came to ask after Mrs. Vale, who is dangerously ill."

"I was so awfully sorry to hear of it. But really in danger, do you mean? Is that why you look so down in the mouth? Is it for Mrs. Vale's sake that you have been scaring your mother out of her senses? She doesn't think so, you know; she was telling me yesterday——"

But a speech which threatened to try the good manners of diplomacy beyond all bearing was interrupted here by the entrance of Angela Rowe, who surveyed the couple with unconcealed annoyance, and peremptorily waved them back when they made as though they would advance to greet her.



## CHAPTER XVII

### ANGELA ON GUARD

"Now I know you are going to scold us," Mrs. Asher began; "but, dear Mrs. Rowe, we don't deserve scolding any more than you do. Why should you claim a monopoly of pluck and neighbourly conduct? We aren't afraid, and we want to be allowed to do our duty by lending you a hand. At least that is what *I* want; as for poor Mr. Glyn——"

"Poor Mr. Glyn," interrupted Angela with an asperity which she seldom displayed, "has been told already that there is nothing for him to do here, and that he cannot in common prudence be received. Dr. Sewell will be very angry when he hears of this."

"I don't," Ernest valiantly declared, "care a brass farthing for old Sewell."

"I daresay you don't," Angela vindictively returned. "I doubt whether you care very much for anybody except yourself—please stand back! But Dr. Sewell and I do care a little about the health of the parish, and we don't wish to spread an epidemic if we can help it. I can't," she added, turning to Mrs. Asher, "tell you any more than you might have heard at the door. Dr. Sewell thinks Barbara a shade better this morning; but she is not out of danger, and can't

be for some days to come, even if all goes well. Of course it is quite out of the question for you to lend us a hand, as you suggest; you can't have been serious in proposing it."

"Won't you," cried Mrs. Asher, turning up her fine eyes and clasping her hands histrionically, "believe that I *am* serious? Nothing would rejoice me more than to serve you and Mrs. Vale and the children in this trouble. I don't pretend to be a skilled nurse; still I feel sure that *some* work could be found for me to do."

Angela Rowe had the kindest heart in the world, but she had been up all night; she was very tired, very anxious, and her nerves were on edge.

"Work can always be found for people who insist upon having it," she dryly replied. "You might not enjoy the sort of work that we should be able to give you, and, naturally, your undertaking any would entail your remaining here in quarantine for a certain number of weeks. If you don't object to that, and to getting no thanks from Barbara, who is sure to be extremely annoyed, the servants shall be told to prepare a bed-room for you."

This unexpected acquiescence on Mrs. Rowe's part did not fail to produce the desired effect upon a lady who had never for one moment contemplated the sacrifice alluded to. It would have been pleasanter and more telling to be repelled, in spite of pathetic pleadings; but retreat was, in any case, unavoidable, and Mrs. Asher accomplished hers with such ingenuity as Heaven had bestowed upon her. On no account, she sorrowfully declared, must she risk annoying Mrs. Vale. She had hoped that she might perhaps be of some little use; but she was afraid, from what had been said, that she might only

be in the way, and that it would be selfish of her to persist. Would it, she wondered, be too much to ask that dear Mrs. Vale should be informed of her very sincere and heart-felt desire to prove herself a friend in need?

"She shall be told of your kind offer," Angela promised, "as soon as she is in a state to understand what is said to her. At this moment she is scarcely conscious, I am sorry to say."

"How dreadful! I can't tell you how grieved I am. But I do trust that she is on the mend, and that there will be better news for us all soon. Meanwhile, can't I relieve you of any of your burdens? Might I not, for instance, take a report to Lady Mount-Sorrel, who must be so terribly uneasy and distressed?"

Despite her vexation, Angela could not restrain a short laugh. "I am sending constant telegrams to Mount-Sorrel," she answered. "Of course you can go there, if you like, and tell them that you have seen me; but I don't think it would be very judicious just at present to announce, either there or anywhere else, that you have penetrated into a hot-bed of infection."

Mrs. Asher was not ill-satisfied. That saving clause of "just at present," which seemed to imply that her courageous behaviour would meet with its due meed of acknowledgment some day, dismissed her in peace. She had gained all, or very nearly all, that she had hoped to gain, and she withdrew, gracefully waving her hand to the unapproachable Angela, who responded by spraying a shower of disinfecting fluid in her direction.

"So much for Mrs. Asher," remarked Ernest, with a nervously conciliatory laugh; "it hasn't taken you

long to get rid of her. Has my turn come now to be summarily ejected?"

"That sounds like a rather unnecessary question," Angela returned. "You at least, I presume, haven't come to propose yourself in the capacity of a sick-nurse."

"No; but I have been waiting rather a long time upon the chance of being allowed to see you, and——"

"Well, you have seen me and heard me. I hope we shall pull Barbara through; but I can't promise, nor can the doctor. There really is nothing to add, and I can't imagine what object you can have had in forcing your way into the house again."

He would have found it all the more difficult to explain because he himself did not accurately know. Pretty little Mrs. Vale, with whom he had been for a time so much in love, but whom he was quite resigned to cherish as a charming memory, had lured him back to a species of allegiance by the simplest strategy; yet it was only to a species of renewed allegiance that he had been moved. Although illicit philanderings were delightful and irresistible to his amorous temperament, he knew—to put the case more coarsely than he put it himself—on which side his bread was buttered, and he wished Mrs. Rowe to understand that if his light heart was liable to vagaries his hand remained unalterably at her disposal. That, of course, was an intimation which demanded some delicacy of touch, not to mention the self-possession of which he was conscious that he had been deprived by the thought that Barbara might be dying. Perhaps, in this stress of divers emotions, the best thing that he could have said was what he finally did say:

"I came because I couldn't keep away."

However, it mattered little enough whether he said

this or that; for Angela, with her eyes fixed upon him, read his thoughts as clearly as if they had been exhibited to her in nice, big print.

"From whom or from what couldn't you keep away?" she relentlessly inquired.

He had the fatuity to reply, "From you."

"I was in hopes," rejoined the recipient of this graceful compliment, with a somewhat grim smile, "that you were going to be more honest; but, since you choose to put things in that way, let me recommend you to brace yourself up to the requisite pitch of self-denial; for you will certainly have to keep away from me after this until further notice."

"On account of infection, do you mean?" the young man asked anxiously. "But I'm more than willing to take my chance of that."

"Oh, your intrepidity is beyond question; you proved it to demonstration when you spent two afternoons with Barbara, who is as likely as not to have infected you."

"I couldn't possibly help coming in on those two occasions," he protested with much earnestness; "nobody could have helped it. And—and, if you will believe me, I would a great deal rather have stayed outside the window. How was I to know that you had gone for a walk, and that Mrs. Vale was in the library, all by herself?"

Angela remembered the oft-repeated excuse of Adam—which is in truth so good an excuse, if it cannot be called a chivalrous one, and which, since the world began, has been so peculiarly exasperating to her sex. She said:

"If I were you, Mr. Glyn, I would leave well alone. Poor Barbara won't tempt you again, and you might station yourself for a long time outside

the window without risk of being tempted by me. Now, I must beg you to choose whatever way of exit you may prefer, for my time is up."

She heartily despised the man, and was not unwilling to let him see her contempt; but at the same time she was relieved to find that her original diagnosis of his character had been quite correct. He was not, nor was he going to be, dangerous. Barbara might get well again and summon him (in which case he would probably come), and scandalize the neighbourhood by her summons; but Ernest Glyn was not made of the stuff which provides heroes for melodramas, and in the last resort he would run away all alone rather than compromise his future and his career by running away with somebody else's wife. It was, therefore, permissible to dismiss him, for the time being, from memory, as well as from sight.

For several days and nights after this, indeed, Angela Rowe's attention was claimed by matters more urgent than the behaviour, actual or contingent, of Mr. Ernest Glyn. A celebrated London doctor had to be sent for; complications of a temporarily alarming nature had to be dealt with, and it was not until the end of the week that Dr. Sewell was able to say, with a long breath:

"Well, we are out of the wood now; but, upon my honour and conscience, I didn't expect that we ever should be."

And all this time there came no word by post or wire from Denis, whose silence began to be disquieting. Miss Beamish, ever prone to take a pessimistic view, was persuaded that some evil beast had devoured him. He had never, she said, since his departure allowed so long a time to elapse without writing, and he had mentioned to her before setting forth that

telegrams, should any be sent, would be sure to reach him within three or four days. Oh, he would certainly have telegraphed if he had been yet alive.

"Somebody else would certainly have telegraphed by now if he was not alive," Angela sensibly remarked. "One can't suppose that the entire party has been killed and eaten."

Nevertheless, she was uneasy and apprehensive, feeling sure that an accident of some kind, serious or trifling, must have happened, and it may have been a very natural and human longing to talk things over with a sane fellow-creature that prompted her, one frosty morning, to hail George Hallett from an upper window, as he stood patiently on the steps (where, as she knew, he had stood every morning of late) and awaited the butler's daily bulletin.

"Below there!" she called out, when this had been delivered and the inquirer was preparing to remount his horse.

George started and looked up, with a suddenly illumined visage. "Is it you? Hooray! I say, may I come in?"

"Certainly not. I only wanted to tell you that the children are all right again, and that Barbara is going on as well as possible."

"So I am rejoiced to hear. But may I not be allowed the privilege of the *entrée*? It has been granted to Glyn and Mrs. Asher, you know."

"Not with my consent. I squirted disinfectants at them and turned them out as quickly as I could. I should have thought they would have had the discretion to hold their tongues about it."

"Well, they haven't—at least, Mrs. Asher hasn't. She has been proclaiming all over the place that she wanted to take turns with you in nursing the invalids,

and that she would have carried her point if her dear friend Mrs. Vale hadn't become dangerously agitated at the idea of her running such a risk."

"Has she been to Mount-Sorrel?" asked Angela, laughing.

"Yes, I believe so; but the old lady wouldn't see her. All she got by that was a message of thanks and an intimation that her ladyship was kept fully informed. Asher is in a thundering rage about this frost, which looks as if it meant lasting; but I'm almost glad of it, myself. If the hunting was to be stopped, let it be stopped now, while you are still imprisoned."

"Thanks; but I have given up all hope of hunting this season. What is to happen when Barbara is really convalescent I don't know; but it is quite upon the cards that I may have to take her abroad."

"What a horrid shame! I wish you wouldn't mind my just stepping into the hall, where we could talk so much more comfortably."

This Angela would not permit; but she promised not to keep him standing in the cold much longer, and a colloquy ensued which was so far satisfactory that George's robust common sense gave her the support that she needed. She might depend upon it, he said, that Vale was all right, and that his having left her telegrams unanswered proved nothing more than that he was temporarily out of touch with messengers. "Somaliland nowadays is just about as safe as Piccadilly, and a good deal safer than the crossing by Hamilton Place. As for his having been mauled by a lion or a panther, things of that sort are known in London within twenty-four hours of their occurrence. All the same, I can easily telegraph inquiries to the resident at Berbera, if you like. Is Mrs. Vale worrying about it?"



Angela could not honestly say that she was, and therefore left the question unanswered. Other questions were then addressed to her which she was unable to evade, and which caused her to hasten the conclusion of the interview. It was so impossible to make a straightforward, plain-dealing man like George Hallett understand the occasional necessity for tortuous strategy. She knew very well what he wanted: he wanted her to say either that she had dismissed the despicable Glyn with a flea in his ear, or that she would do so on the earliest opportunity; but she did not, for the moment, see her way to any such undertaking as that. Although, in Dr. Sewell's acceptance of the phrase, they might be out of the wood, she doubted very much whether they were out of it yet in a sense equally important, and she felt that she must reserve her liberty of action. Consequently, George rode away at length over the frozen ground in the enjoyment of that blessedness which is said to attach rather to giving than to receiving. For he had certainly bestowed some comfort and had obtained but little in return.

That there was still need for strategic capacity was made manifest to Mrs. Rowe when she returned to her patient's bed-room, and when the attendant nurse was fretfully dismissed, Barbara, reduced and emaciated, but able to sit up in bed and having all her wits about her, had begun to exercise that privilege of fretfulness which must be conceded to persons in her condition. She said:

"What *have* you been doing? I thought you were never coming back."

"I am so sorry; I was obliged to answer some letters," Angela meekly replied.

"Oh, but you haven't only been answering letters;

you have been talking to somebody out of the window. We heard your voices quite distinctly, and we heard him ride away, too. Has he been in a great state of mind? I suppose he has, poor fellow!"

"If he has, he omitted to mention it, and of course my report was reassuring. But I don't think, from what he said, that he has been anxious at all. He seemed to regard me much more as an object of pity on account of my having lost my hunting than of solicitude on sanitary grounds."

"You speak as if I didn't exist. Don't ask me to believe that he never even asked how I was."

"Of course he asked; he came for the purpose of asking, and he was very glad to hear that you were getting on as well as could be wished. But George Hallett—bless him for it!—is always disposed to look at the bright side of things and to take a sanguine view. He has cheered me up, just as I hoped he would when I shouted to him."

"Oh, it was only Mr. Hallett, then," returned Barbara, in a tone of disappointment and indifference. "Why didn't you say so before? I thought it must have been Ernest."

"If it had been Mr. Glyn, do you think I should have signalled to him?"

"I don't know; I hope not. Or rather, I hope you *will* signal to him when he does come. If you require cheering up, surely I do, and perhaps in a few days I also may be permitted to poke my head out of the window."

"It is as certain as anything in this world can be, Barbara, that you will be permitted to do no such thing—least of all for that purpose. You ought not to wish it either."

"Well, I do wish it," Barbara boldly declared.

"You may abuse him as much as you like—and I can see by your face that you are longing to abuse him—but at least he does care for me, and really I don't know who else does. Oh, you care a little, perhaps, and the children care a little; but Denis evidently doesn't. In common decency he might have written or telegraphed, and he has done neither."

"It stands to reason that that is only because our letters and telegrams have failed to reach him. To tell you the truth, I was getting rather uneasy at hearing nothing from him, and it is just upon that point that George Hallett has cheered me up. As he very sensibly points out, no news in a case of this kind can only mean that there is no cause for alarm; and it is just as well, after all, that Denis will get the whole of our news, bad and good, together."

"I don't care when he gets it. I don't care if he never gets it. He may go his own way and I shall go mine, as soon as I am well again. Now don't preach, Angela. I am not strong enough to bear being preached at yet. All I know is that never, never before in all my born days have I been so horribly, miserably bored."

With that Barbara began to cry like a baby, and had to be petted and comforted for a considerable length of time. She was not a very tractable patient, nor, as Angela perceived, was she likely to become more so with returning health. Whether revelations which might be made concerning Ernest Glyn would produce the desired effect upon her was, moreover, extremely doubtful. Therefore it seemed best, upon the whole, to slip out of the room at length and despatch one more telegram to Aden:

"Please come home at once. All well, but you are wanted."

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE WOMEN BEAT THE MEN

MR. ASHER was moodily breakfasting all by himself one cold morning, when his wife surprised him by suddenly entering the room. "You up at this hour, Isabella!" he exclaimed. "What next?"

"I am always up at this hour," Mrs. Asher returned, "though of course I am not often such a fool as to be down. If there is a time of day at which everybody shows to disadvantage, it is breakfast-time."

Her husband threw a half-admiring, half-deprecating glance at the flowing garment which she wore, and which was evidently as costly as it was beautiful. There was no denying that she showed to advantage in it; but the chances were very much against its having been paid for, and these rare matutinal acts of condescension usually presaged a demand for a cheque. He said, just by way of throwing up weak intrenchments:

"I've just been looking at my pass-book, and I find that I'm most confoundedly short of cash. These hounds are costing me a pretty penny, I can tell you."

"So I should imagine," Mrs. Asher observed tranquilly; "and the frost looks as if it had come to stay, too, which must be annoying for you."

"Annoying," growled the M. F. H., "isn't the word."

"Then use a stronger one, if you like; don't mind me. For my own part, I think it is quite enough to be annoyed, as I confess I am, and I see no reason for submitting to unnecessary annoyances. Therefore, my dear Reuben, I propose to leave you for the present to your own devices. In other words, I'm off."

"Off where?" her husband irritably inquired. "You can't be off anywhere without additional expense, you know."

"I suppose not; but that, after all, is your lookout, isn't it? I shall go up to London in the first instance, and after that I don't know—we shall see. I warned you all along that I shouldn't spend the winter here unless the county, led by Lady Mount-Sorrel, treated me decently."

"Dash it, Isabella, what do you expect me to do! I can't make the old woman invite you to dinner."

"I'm afraid you can't, Reuben; and what is worse, I am afraid I can't either. That intrepid visit to South-acre has turned out a complete failure, and I don't mind confessing that I haven't another card left in my hand. As I don't feel inclined to sit down under a defeat, I must retire."

"You women are past all comprehension and all endurance!" cried Mr. Asher, striking the table heavily with his fist. "Talk about sitting down under a defeat! As if there could be a more absolute admission of defeat than allowing yourself to be driven out of the county after we have spent a small fortune on building this place, and after I have let myself in for Lord knows how many thousands a year by taking the hounds!"

"What the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve over," Mrs. Asher coolly returned. "I can bear eviction, but I can't, and I won't, bear being snubbed every day of my life. These are delicate shades of feeling which, no doubt, pass your comprehension, Reuben. Fortunately, there is no particular need for you to comprehend them; all you have to do is to realize their inevitable results."

He realized them; he was well aware that his nominal control of the purse-strings was worth nothing as an argument or a menace; he knew that when Isabella talked like that she not only meant business, but was assured of ultimate surrender on his part. With a futility of which he was fully conscious he reiterated his appeal to her non-existent pride.

"They'll all chuckle—Lady Mount-Sorrel and Mrs. Rowe and Mrs. Vale and Hallett, the whole lot of 'em. They'll say they have got all they asked for out of us, while we haven't got so much as a thank-you out of them."

"Very likely they will; but you will suffer from that sort of thing a good deal more than I shall. In fact, I shall not suffer at all from the moment that my back is turned. I am really sorry for you, Reuben; though you have brought this upon yourself, and you can't blame me for being as good as my word. What I said at the beginning I say still: I am willing to stay at Beaulieu and see you through upon the condition that by hook or by crook, by fair means or by foul, an invitation to dine at Mount-Sorrel is obtained for us. But upon no other terms."

By fair means or by foul! Well, by foul means the thing might be capable of accomplishment, and—the desertion of Isabella, for more reasons than one, would be a most deplorable event. On a previous

occasion, as may be remembered, Mr. Asher had got the better of temptation; it must now be recorded that temptation got the better of him. He was a great deal ashamed of himself; yet he could not resist remarking:

"I might, if I had chosen, have put you up to a better way of squeezing Mrs. Vale than offering to nurse her and her children when you weren't wanted. It isn't a very pretty way, but it would have been effectual, unless I'm much mistaken."

Mrs. Asher's eyes sparkled. "I knew it!" she exclaimed. "More than once I have seen by your face—you have a speaking countenance at times, Reuben—that you were keeping something back. Well, out with it! If it is worth anything, so much the better for you."

Then he told her; and, by way of compensation for any detriment which his self-esteem may have suffered through the process, he was assured that his information would probably turn out to be worth a good deal.

"You see, the old woman is nothing if not pious and moral; that's where we have her on the hip. The average dowager wouldn't care two straws; everybody's wives and daughters and grand-daughters are more or less embraced by unauthorized persons in these times, and what, after all, does a kiss matter? But Lady Mount-Sorrel is an antediluvian: she will very much prefer having us as friends than as enemies, I suspect, when once she hears what it is in our power to say. You can swear to the fact, of course?"

Mr. Asher shrugged his shoulders. "My eyesight is pretty good. At the same time I am not prepared to say that, if I were clapped into a witness-box, I should take my oath to having seen young Glyn and

Mrs. Vale hugging one another. One must—hang it all! one must draw the line somewhere.”

“As if it wouldn’t be drawn a long way short of witness-boxes!” his wife contemptuously returned. “As if Mr. Vale wanted a divorce, or could get one if he did, upon such evidence! But that is no reason why Mrs. Vale and her virtuous grandmother shouldn’t be frightened out of their wits.”

“I see. Well, there you are, Isabella; there’s the denunciation for you, and you can make what use you please of it. I can’t,” continued Mr. Asher, surveying his wife curiously, “altogether understand your thinking this sort of business good enough; still, since it appears that you do——”

“There are many things, Reuben, which you would understand if you were a woman instead of being a man, and a rather dull-witted one at that. I suppose you mean to intimate that I am not overparticular. I never set up to be, and what’s more, these ladies haven’t any superfluous pride about them either, as you will very soon see. It has been a fight between them and me all along, and I shall take any weapon against them that happens to come handy, just as they would have done, you may depend upon it, in my place.”

“H’m! and now what are you going to do? Is it to be Mount-Sorrel or Southacre? Shall I ring and order the carriage?”

Mrs. Asher pondered alternatives for a minute. “You may order the carriage for half past three,” she said presently. “No; I think it had better be Brayton Lodge in the first instance. Mrs. Rowe is at home again, I hear, and perhaps the thing could be worked more easily through her than through either of the others, who are sure to be strongly barri-



caded. One would rather not write letters unless one is driven to it. Reuben, you would have spared yourself and me a lot of trouble if you had spoken sooner; but you have done wisely to break silence at last. The chances are distinctly in favour now of your retaining the inestimable boon of my society until Easter."

The absurd woman was full of eagerness for a renewed campaign. Her absurdity needs no demonstration, nor, perhaps, does her ambition require to be accounted for. Nine out of ten mortal ambitions resolve themselves into a longing to overcome opposition, and although it could not really make much difference to the generally accepted Mrs. Asher whether Trentshire accepted her or not, it had become well-nigh indispensable to her happiness that she should impose herself upon that reluctant county. So, in the course of the afternoon, Mrs. Rowe received a somewhat unwelcome visitor.

Angela was at home once more, a little against her will. It was pleasant to be at home and pleasant to be released from irksome daily duties; but it was less satisfactory to have been virtually dismissed from Southacre, with scant ceremony and scantier thanks. A moment of impatience—only one moment out of so vast a number of patient hours—had brought this upon her. She had been unwise, no doubt, to repeat certain remarks of Ernest Glyn's; she had done so partly out of sheer exasperation, partly from a well-intentioned wish to exhibit him in his true colours, and something like a breach between her and Barbara had been the instant result. A downright quarrel had only been averted by prompt retirement on her part—a retirement of which she was not asked to think better. And now, to crown all, here was Mrs. Asher

announcing in so many words that her husband had seen enough to compromise Mrs. Vale hopelessly with strait-laced neighbours.

Mrs. Asher made that announcement briefly and without circumlocution, adding: "I bear no sort of malice against your friend; her secret will be perfectly safe with us, provided that she grants us the very small favour we ask of her. Only we won't take anything else or anything less. She or you or somebody must tell Lady Mount-Sorrel to ask us to dinner and introduce us to everybody in these parts whom we don't know."

"Is it possible," exclaimed Angela, "that you don't shrink from resorting to blackmail!"

"My dear Mrs. Rowe, of course it is! Blackmail, if you choose to call it by that name, will evidently do more for us than subscriptions to charities or other generous measures, and I daresay you have discovered, as I have, that honours and dignities in this world are not so much bestowed upon the deserving as upon the troublesome. Besides, you haven't shrunk, any of you, from inducing my husband to take the hounds and then leaving us in the lurch. Oh, we owe you no exaggerated mercy, and we don't propose to show you any. But we make you a very reasonable offer."

It was an offer, Angela perceived, which, whether reasonable or not, could scarcely be rejected. Mr. Asher's veracity was, to be sure, open to dispute; but it was not worth while to dispute it now; added to which, a lie—even if this had been a lie, as she knew it was not—may often work quite as much mischief as the truth. She therefore said:

"I think you are behaving rather disgracefully——"

"We don't in the least mind your thinking that," Mrs. Asher interpolated airily.

"Still, for Barbara Vale's sake and—and for the credit of the county, I will do what I can. I will make a point of seeing Lady Mount-Sorrel and asking her for the invitation which you demand. I can't promise to be successful; but——"

"Oh, you'll succeed all right, if you don't mince matters," Mrs. Asher interrupted confidently. "As far as that goes, I am ready to beard the old lady myself; only I think it may be managed more decently and quietly through you. Please assure her, with my love, that all she has to do is to climb down at once; she will have nothing to fear from us after that."

That Lady Mount-Sorrel would have to climb down seemed almost certain; that Mrs. Asher's word was not to be relied upon, and that further extortions might be anticipated from her, as from all blackmailers, seemed highly probable. Yet, short of boldly defying the Ashers (a risky course, with Barbara in her present reckless mood and Denis's muscular arms out of reach), what choice was there but to yield?

"In any case," Angela reflected after Mrs. Asher had left her, "what I have undertaken to do commits nobody except myself."

It did not, for example, commit Ernest Glyn, who was presently shown in, and whom Angela would, for once, have been glad to see, had he not brought his mother with him. Lady Helen, however, proclaimed without a moment's loss of time that her appearance in the invidious part of a third person was to be quite transitory.

"My dear," said she, "I am so delighted to see you under your own roof once more. But I have

only time now just to shake you by the hand and hurry on to a meeting of the Guild of Saint What's-her-name. I always forget her name, though Mr. Doddridge would never forgive me if I were to miss a meeting, and Ernest, of course, would see me excommunicated before he would accompany me to one. Will you, like the good, charitable creature that you are, keep him here until I call for him on my way back? The doctor says he ought not to walk out in this bitter wind; yet there is absolutely nothing for him to do in the house except to play billiards with his father; which, unfortunately, doesn't amuse either of them."

Angela made the only answer that could be made to an appeal so pathetic, and Lady Helen soon withdrew, pluming herself upon a display of tact which left her son a trifle shamefaced.

"I humbly apologize," said he, with an embarrassed laugh. "This really wasn't my suggestion; but I hadn't the fortitude or the self-denial to resist it when it was held out to me as a bait."

"You have nothing to apologize for," he was amiably assured; "on the contrary, it is only your having come of your own accord that has prevented me from sending for you."

"Really!" he cried, throwing all the emotion and ecstasy that he could simulate into the word.

"Yes; I want rather particularly to have a talk with you, and I will tell you why in a very few sentences, which I must beg you not to interrupt."

A very few sentences sufficed to acquaint him with the details of Mrs. Asher's visit and her menace, and although he several times attempted to interrupt, silence was as often imposed upon him.

"You will observe," his informant concluded,

"that I am not asking you whether Mr. Asher's story is true or false; perhaps I know or perhaps I don't care to know. But I wish to put you on your guard. There is no reason that I can see why you should make admissions."

"I make none," the young man declared.

"Very well; mind you don't make any. I think myself that Lady Mount-Sorrel will have to invite these people to dine, and that she will be wise if she does; but, as you know, she does not always act wisely, and in case the worst should come to the worst, we had better not weaken our defence. I am sure you must realize the importance of that."

"Of course I do, and I am prepared to withstand that Hebrew eavesdropper to any extent. Why, by his own account, Vale couldn't have helped seeing what he asserts that he saw, and Vale hasn't breathed a word. But, between you and me——"

"Not even between you and me, please," Angela protested, raising her hand. "Confidences have passed between you and me, and I daresay we understand one another pretty well upon the whole; but, for the present, all we have to do is to agree that Barbara must not be further compromised."

"My dear Mrs. Rowe, I don't want to compromise her; upon my word and honour, I don't! All the same, it isn't very easy, you know—it's deuced difficult, in fact—to—to——"

"I can well understand how difficult it must be; but screw yourself up to the effort. After all, it won't be the first time, will it? You have confessed already to me, remember, upon how many previous occasions you have had to save yourself and others by taking to your heels."

"Yes, and what I told you was perfectly true, every

word of it. But you aren't, surely, going to be so cruel as to ask me to take to my heels now! You can't mean to banish me from the neighbourhood—from *your* neighbourhood!"

"I do, though," Angela uncompromisingly returned; "I think that, under the circumstances, it is your clear duty to quit this neighbourhood."

"Then I can't agree with you, and I can't obey you. I am ready, as I tell you, to swear anything if Asher is fool enough to make himself disagreeable; but I am not ready to give up all that you ask me to give up. Besides, you forget that I am still awfully seedy. Where am I to go if I am to be turned out of my happy home?"

"Don't you think that you might be better, and perhaps even happier, in London?"

"No, I don't. Moreover, the governor, who is in one of his screwiest moods just now, I am sorry to say, wouldn't shell out the money that I should need."

For one moment Angela had a wild idea of offering to shell out the requisite cash herself; but perceiving, upon reflection, that the objections to such a course were rather too numerous and too grave to be disregarded, she gave up that point and resumed:

"Well, at any rate, you must promise me not to show your face at Southacre again."

He had the wit to see his advantage and to press it. Certainly he would give Southacre a wide berth, should that prove possible; he asked nothing better than to do so. But there were obligations; there were claims. Mrs. Rowe could easily understand that it might be virtually out of his power to remain away. If, however, he could present himself to Mrs. Vale as an engaged man; if he could tell her that he

had had the extraordinary and undeserved joy of winning——

His somewhat laboured eloquence was abruptly cut short here, for the lady whom he was about to honour with an offer of marriage did not at all wish to be compelled into prematurely refusing him. She exclaimed:

“For goodness’ sake, mind what you are about! Never will you be given an embassy or even a second-class legation if you outrage the first principles of diplomacy like this. I have been a good and long-suffering friend to you thus far. I think you must admit that I have been very nice and pleasant to you, in spite of some provocation.”

“Of course you have.”

“I don’t know so much about the ‘of course’; but, at any rate, I have. Well, don’t, by saying what you were going to say, leave me no option but to be nasty and unpleasant. It is agreed that you are not to call at Southacre again if you can help it; and it is understood that, in the event of your being unable to help it, you will exercise a cruel but salutary candour; further than that we evidently can’t advance for the present, and neither of us must try. Now let us talk about something altogether different until your mother returns from her meeting.”

The young man acquiesced, not unwillingly. He felt that he had in all conscience shown himself a somewhat unfaithful swain; that Mrs. Rowe’s natural pride was entitled to a little respect, and that it would be brutal, as well as unwise, of him to force the pace. So (to the inexpressible boredom of one of them) they proceeded to discuss exhaustively matters which, if not altogether different, were susceptible of safe discussion; and when at length Lady Helen reap-

peared, her son was restored to her as free as she had left him.

"The more shame for you!" she exclaimed in frank disappointment while they drove away together through the darkness; "you can't expect such a chance as you have missed to recur every day."

"It will recur, my dear mother," Ernest composedly replied, "as soon as ever I am ready for it. You don't understand what a lot of tact and delicacy an affair of this sort requires."

After all, Ernest Glyn may end as an envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary: he has many of the recognised qualifications for holding such a post with credit and distinction.



## CHAPTER XIX

### BARBARA'S DRESSING-GOWN

IN moments of profound sadness and dejection, in moments (which of us is without experience of them?) when it seems as though nobody in the wide world cared for or understood, much less appreciated us, and as though our whole earthly career from the outset had been one prolonged, pathetic mistake—in such doleful moments men are wont to fall back upon the anodyne of tobacco, while women not unfrequently seek consolation from clothes. Now Barbara Vale, extended upon the sofa in her bed-room, and wearing an exquisite pale-blue *robe de chambre* trimmed with old Mechlin lace, which had just arrived from London, was faced by a long mirror, so that she could not help seeing how perfectly charming both she and the dressing-gown were. And this agreeable reproduction of two lovely objects, which she contemplated from between half-closed eyelids, certainly did comfort her a good deal; although she continued to shed an occasional tear, as indeed she had been doing ever since her maid had put the finishing touches to her toilet. She had so many reasons for crying that she had forgotten some of them, and was only kept aware of their existence by a dull pain about the region of the heart; but what was in reality more

the matter with her than anything else was that she was so dreadfully, cruelly bored.

"You may say what you like," she moaned, addressing Miss Beamish, who had been summoned to her presence, and who had not yet spoken, "but I still think that Angela has behaved like a beast in deserting me while I am so ill."

Miss Beamish, whose heart Angela had won, would fain have declared that Mrs. Rowe had behaved like an angel, and that people who have been virtually requested to make themselves scarce cannot fairly be stigmatized as deserters for going away. It would also have given her some pleasure to remark that, according to Dr. Sewell, Barbara was no longer ill at all. However, she only replied:

"It would be quite easy to send a note to Brayton Lodge. Or even a verbal message would do, I am sure."

"It would not be in the least easy," Barbara snapishly retorted; "it would be extremely difficult. Anyhow, you may be sure that I shall send neither. However wretched and neglected I may be, I don't care to appeal to anybody's charity."

The truth was that she was dying to call back her patient friend, whom she missed at every turn, and whose rather offensive assertions concerning Ernest Glyn she was willing to forgive; but wounded pride, backed by sundry qualms of conscience, withheld her, and she was in hopes that Miss Beamish would have intelligence enough to take a hint and a venial liberty. Unfortunately, that excellent woman was too dull to guess what was required of her; so, after a few more leading remarks which led to nothing, Barbara sighed irritably, and said:

"Well, if you are going to read that letter to me,

perhaps you had better read it. I don't suppose there is much more in it than there was in mine."

There was rather more in this belated epistle of Denis Vale's than in the curt missive which he had despatched to his wife on the same date from the borders of Ogaden; but it threw no additional light upon his subsequent movements. He had at the time of writing just heard of Dicky's illness, and he informed Miss Beamish, as he had informed Barbara, that he proposed to leave his companions as soon as possible, with a view to returning home. How soon that was likely to be he did not particularize; only he gave minute instructions as to the forwarding of telegrams to Aden, and the inference was that those telegrams ought to have reached him long ago. Miss Beamish, fearing the worst, made no secret of her fears; but Barbara scornfully repudiated alarm.

"My husband," she remarked, "is not one of those people who allow such a trifle as an outbreak of scarlatina in their families to interfere with sport. He must have said to himself that it was sure to be all right; and, as a matter of fact, it has been all right, you see. On my side, I feel quite comfortably sure that he is all right, and that we shall hear from him again whenever he can spare a quarter of an hour from the lions and a messenger to send to the coast. If he hasn't acknowledged telegrams, it is for the simple reason that he hasn't yet called at Aden to inquire for any."

That, no doubt, was the simple explanation of his silence, and Miss Beamish's suggestion that it was a disquieting one was not well received. After Miss Beamish had been dismissed, Barbara solaced herself for a time by dwelling upon Denis's phenomenal selfishness and scarcely less phenomenal hypocrisy.

All that pretended solicitude about the children, all those elaborate directions as to the despatch of the latest bulletins, followed up, as they almost certainly had been, by a southward march and a plunge into yet more inaccessible wilds—what humbug! “I am what I am,” Barbara complacently reflected, “if I am not quite what he is amiable enough to think me; but at least I am not a humbug.”

Then she reverted to pensive contemplation of the dressing-gown, which it seemed such a sad pity that nobody, not even Angela Rowe, could join her in appreciating; and then, since Angela was, for the time being, unapproachable, she made up her mind all of a sudden to summon Ernest Glyn. He might have called without waiting to be summoned; but, as he had not done so, and as it was extremely probable that he had been restrained from the performance of an act of common civility by influences which should not have weighed with him, she scrawled a few lines upon a sheet of note-paper, intimating that she would be downstairs during the afternoon, and gave orders for the transmission of the same to Glyn Place without delay. Although she was not actually jealous, she was assailed every now and again by vexatious misgivings; in such a world as this one cannot, alas! implicitly trust anybody. Besides, the long hours of the afternoon had to be lived through somehow or other.

The virtuous Ernest had proposed to live through them blamelessly by means of newspapers, cigarettes, and intermittent slumbers; but the arrival of Mrs. Vale's note, with its offer of a more seductive program, caused him to waver. “A bit dangerous, you know,” said he, addressing himself in accents of mild reproof; still it is a craven heart that shrinks

from danger and a poor one that never rejoices. He further reflected that he must sooner or later break with Barbara; that she was providing him with an occasion of so doing which it was perhaps his duty to seize, and that Angela had, after all, foreseen and as good as sanctioned the unavoidable interview of farewell. Upon a dispassionate review of the whole situation, therefore, he decided to array himself in a rather more becoming suit of clothes; having done which, he slipped round to the stables and made so bold as to borrow his father's cob.

He had a pleasant ride through deep lanes and across stretches of pasture, for the frost had abruptly yielded to an inrush of tepid air from the southwest. This he enjoyed, as well as the moist smell of the softening earth, the shafts of pale sunlight which broke here and there through a low, gray sky, and the easy paces of his quiet beast. The prospect of bidding adieu to a lady whom he had repeatedly assured of his undying devotion was not quite so nice; but it was not yet absolutely certain that that painful ordeal would have to be faced forthwith. So much must, of course, depend upon Barbara herself and upon her manner of receiving him. Very likely he might not be compelled to say anything of a nature to wound her feelings or his own; and indeed by the time that he reached Southacre he had well-nigh discarded the stern purpose with which he had set out. He was a tender-hearted youth in every acceptance of the term, and to give pain to a very charming woman, who was scarcely recovered from serious illness, was a task too repugnant to his nature to be undertaken in obedience to anything short of dire necessity.

Barbara's dressing-gown did the rest. He found her reclining in a low chair beside the library fire, and

her artistic crapery (for which she apologized), combined with the blue silk open-work stockings that matched it, brought him almost literally to his knees. In the presence of that perfect little vignette of feminine beauty and elegance, which symbolized all manner of unspeakable things, how could he think about Angela Rowe, who represented an entirely different class of ideas? He did not think about Mrs. Rowe; he dismissed all memory of her and of what he owed her to a more fitting moment. Dropping upon a foot-stool in front of the blazing logs, he began to make use of his eyes and his tongue (he had expressive eyes and a fairly skilful tongue) after a fashion neither prudent nor honest, yet, in view of the surroundings and the temptations, scarcely inexcusable.

Barbara listened to him with smiling toleration and gently rebuked him at intervals; but at length she said: "I hope you don't imagine that I sent for you in order to hear you talk like this."

"Why," he asked, "did you send for me? It was rather cruel of you to send if you wanted me to talk in any other way."

"Oh, I don't know that I wanted you to talk in any other way," she frankly owned; "it is rather nice of you to talk nonsense, although, of course, we both realize that it is nonsense. I suppose you reserve your common sense—of which I am sure you have as ample a stock as anybody—for the demure Angela. How are you getting on with your courtship of the *beaux yeux de sa cassette*?"

"Was that," he reproachfully inquired, "what you wanted to find out?"

"Perhaps it was. Anyhow, you need not be in the least afraid of gratifying my curiosity, for I am

not easily offended. Nothing could be more natural or more human than your anxiety to provide comfortably for yourself; and romance, as everybody knows, has very little to do with marriage."

Ernest's sigh was a concentration of pathos. "It certainly won't have much to do with my marriage, if I ever do marry. For me there is only one woman in the world, and she is hopelessly out of my reach. So I sometimes ask myself: Why not Mrs. Rowe as soon as another? She is rich; my people urge her upon me, and she herself—but I won't say anything about that."

"She is making a fool of you," Barbara declared, with a touch of asperity. "It isn't, to be sure, very difficult to make a fool of you, and her motives stare you in the face; still, as you don't seem to perceive them, let me, as a friend, warn you against probable disappointment. Angela is no more likely to bestow her hand and her fortune upon you than upon the Pope."

The young man received this uncivil assertion imperturbably. It did not alter his own impression of Mrs. Rowe's sentiments, while Barbara's displeasure was flattering to his vanity.

"I haven't asked for her hand or her fortune yet," he mildly observed; "and Heaven knows that, if I eventually work myself up to the proposing point, she won't break my heart by refusing me. But I wonder what can be her motives, which you call so conspicuous, for giving me encouragement. Because she really has, quite between ourselves, given me a good deal of encouragement."

"Naturally she has. Don't you understand—oh, how dull men are!—that Angela is nothing if not virtuous and self-sacrificing and altruistic and all the

rest of it? Don't you understand that she is my friend, and even more Denis's friend? Don't you understand that her one aim and object just now is to preserve me from dangers which happen to be altogether imaginary, but which she would consider positively imminent if she could see you at the present moment?"

"Ah!" murmured Ernest. And he could not resist adding, after a pause, "I wish they were not imaginary, those dangers. I wish—oh! how I wish—that that husband of yours, who seems so eager to efface himself, were an imaginary person."

He really was letting himself go. The dressing-gown may have been responsible, or perhaps the stimulating warmth of the fire, or, again, the comfortable reflection that Denis Vale was somewhere in East Africa, while Angela Rowe was at least out of sight and hearing. Anyhow, at this juncture Barbara's finger-tips were fervently kissed, and as she resented neither that act of homage nor the words which had preceded it, her admirer was free to draw his own conclusions.

These were of the oddest kind. He was a little bit in love, he was enjoying the situation immensely, and he rejoiced to think that Barbara was enjoying it also; yet the consideration which pressed upon him with more urgency than any other was that he really must mind what he was about. One step more and he would be in waters quite deep enough to drown him. He therefore judged it opportune and expedient to add:

"I wish that fellow Asher's imagination could be curbed too. Do you remember my saying good-bye to you in the garden before I went away last summer?"



"What," asked Barbara rather sharply, "has Mr. Asher's imagination to do with that?"

"Only that he professes to have been a witness of what took place at the time. He walked back from the station with Vale, it seems, and he declares he saw what I am ready to take my oath that he couldn't have seen. We shall have to be careful, though; we mustn't give the enemy any further occasion to blaspheme, must we?"

This reminder that there was some need for circumspection was successful to an extent far beyond that contemplated by its enunciator. Barbara, thoroughly frightened, started up, with blanched cheeks and dilated eyes.

"I knew it!" she exclaimed; "I was certain from that man's impudent manner that he was keeping something up his sleeve. He has been threatening you, of course—not that he can do you any harm, although he can ruin me—and I suppose you have been idiotic enough to meet him with a blank denial. As if there were the least chance of your word or mine being believed against his. What does he want? He makes some demand, I presume, and it must be granted, whatever it may be; for we are absolutely in his power. You know that what happened was all your fault, and that I was not in any sort of way to blame; but nobody else knows it, and nobody else will be convinced by anything that we can say—except, indeed, Angela Rowe, whom I took into my confidence, but who can give us no practical help."

"But she is going to give us practical help; don't be so agitated," pleaded the young man, once more kissing Barbara's hand, which, this time, was snatched out of his grasp. "It will all come right, you'll see, and I only mentioned this tiresome little *contretemps*

in order to explain why we are bound to be cautious. All Asher wants is to be asked to dine at Mount-Sorrel, and Mrs. Rowe is going to arrange that. It was Mrs. Rowe, not me, whom he threatened, by the way. Or rather, he sent his wife to threaten her."

"What? Mrs. Asher too!" cried Barbara, in increased dismay. "But this is worse and worse! The man might have held his tongue—he actually has held it all these months, it appears—but she never will. And as for Angela's getting that invitation for them by any means short of letting granny hear the whole truth—which I can't and won't allow—there is no hope of such a thing. Now, I will tell you what you must do; for there is nothing else in the world to be done. Tear off to Beaulieu as fast as you can go and tell Mr. Asher that unless he recants every word he has said and confesses to his wife that he has been romancing, you will break every bone in his body. That is the very least that you can do for me, after having got me into such a horrible mess."

Ernest Glyn looked a little blue. It was all very fine to talk about breaking Asher's bones, but he was reduced by recent illness, and even if he had been in the pink of possible condition, Asher, who was a big, powerful man, could easily have thrashed him with one hand. However, since such an admission is never a very agreeable one to make to an outraged lady, he assigned other causes for deprecating her suggestion. Rows should at all costs be avoided; anything in the shape of a personal altercation would be sure to give rise to more scandal and gossip than it could ever avert; the Ashers were most unlikely to resort to measures of revenge which would be of no service to them, even if they should fail to gain their point; but Mrs. Rowe might be relied upon to gain their

point for them, and so forth. His representations were not at all well received.

"I do believe," cried Barbara contemptuously, "that you are afraid of that Jew! Yes, I really do believe that you are afraid of him. And I don't believe that you have ever for one moment cared about me. I thought you did; I was foolish enough to think that there was at least one person in the world who was sincere, though he might be silly; but my eyes are opened now. I know now that I have not one solitary friend."

Tears were in her eyes and her voice. He was infinitely touched, and he essayed to soothe her by methods in which experience had taught him to place every confidence; but she declined to be pacified. There was no getting over the fact that he had evaded the proffered part of a hero, and he was upon the point of promising, in despair, to pull Mr. Asher's nose, when the interruption of Dicky, with flaming cheeks and blazing eyes, preserved him from thus insanely pledging himself.

Dicky was very angry and rather incoherent; but, being a resolute little person, he contrived to make his demands intelligible. Miss Beamish, it seemed, had been asserting that his father was dead, slaughtered by wild beasts in Africa, and he wished to be informed, yes or no, whether that statement was true or false.

"Miss Beamish is a senseless old owl!" cried Barbara impatiently.

Dick intimated that this was no news to him, and that he had, indeed, expressed himself in almost identical terms to the lady; still, he must insist upon a categorical reply. Was papa alive, or dead? Alive, of course! "Then what have you been crying about?"

"I have not been crying, you tiresome little wretch," his mother mendaciously answered; "and if I had been, it wouldn't, I can assure you, have been about that."

Ernest presently found himself outside the house and trotting away. The opportunity of retreating from a difficult position had seemed too good a one to be neglected, and he did not regret having availed himself of it. Nevertheless, he felt humiliated and unhappy. There could no longer be any doubt, he thought, that dear little Mrs. Vale loved him, and if he had had doubts as to the genuineness of his love for her, they had been removed by the harsh treatment to which she had subjected him. He had not been at all disinclined to gently throw her over; but to be spurned by her was quite another thing—so entirely another thing that he was half prepared to win back her esteem by executing her absurd behests. Only half prepared, though. Asher, it stood to reason, could not be intimidated; nor, even in the event of that impossible result being achieved, could his bold assailant anticipate any renewal save the dismal one of falling between two stools. For Mrs. Rowe, naturally, would never forgive him, while Barbara's husband was, in all probability, already on the homeward voyage. If only Miss Beamish's apprehensions and Barbara's hopes (had she not as good as implied that they were hopes?) as to the fate of that marplot were justifiable. But what was the use of dwelling upon such fantastic notions? The young man ended by sighing and accepting his own clearly indicated fate, which, after all, was no unenviable one, as fates go. Only there was a pang at his heart when he remembered those tears, those reproaches, and that dressing-gown.

## CHAPTER XX

### MR. ASHER'S REPENTANCE

THE Bishop of Blackhampton enjoyed attending afternoon service at the Cathedral when he could, which, as he himself was wont to say, was "about once in a blue moon." Especially he enjoyed doing so when, as now, the days were short and the spacious, rather gloomy edifice which, from having been a parish church, had been raised to Cathedral rank, was lighted only by yellow wax candles, dotted along the stalls and desks of the choir. From the imposing canopied throne on which he sat he looked down upon those dark spaces, that sparse, starry illumination, while he listened to the pure, clear voices of the surpliced children, and his thoughts drifted far away back to his own childhood, his own youth, his own disappointed, thwarted enthusiasms. At such moments his belief in the future of the ancient, beautiful, dignified Anglican Church—a belief rudely shaken at other moments—revived, and he murmured under his breath "*Sursum corda.*" For he was by temperament impressionable, and he was blessed with a musical ear, and the district which his diocese embraced chanced to be one where the people had sensitive hearing and voices of a pleasant quality. He ought, of course, to have been saying his prayers, and he did say them; but it was perhaps allowable for him to let his attention

wander a little during the lessons from the inarticulate droning of the canon in residence, and to count the very few heads of the week-day worshippers. Among these he detected on this murky afternoon of mid-winter the glossy and unexpected one of Reuben Asher, Esq., M. F. H., and he said to himself, with a smothered sigh, "I wonder why! I wish I could think that the man's attendance meant a renewal of interest in diocesan work and a much-needed renewal of support."

That, happily for the diocese and the clergy and the ill-lodged factory hands, was just what it did mean. Mr. Asher, on the conclusion of the service, was hanging about the precincts, when the disrobed bishop emerged, for the express purpose of intimating as much. He said:

"My lord, I owe you an apology and a cheque; here they both are for you. You may remember my having written to you some time ago with reference to the doubts which I then felt as to my continuing to reside in Trentshire, and my consequent disinclination to saddle myself with local responsibilities."

"I remember it very well," answered the bishop, smiling; "but I am glad to know that you are now firmly established in the local saddle—the hunting saddle—and this very kind and welcome gift of yours proves, I hope, that you no longer think of turning your back upon us."

"Well, yes; I have taken the hounds, and I'm sure I don't want to leave Beaulieu—never did, indeed. Whether I can venture to call myself firmly established yet is another question; that depends more upon Mrs. Asher than upon me. You know what these ladies are."

The bishop, carefully stowing away the cheque in

his breast-pocket, admitted that he did. "But I understand that Lady Mount-Sorrel did call upon you. That was what Mrs. Asher wanted, was it not?"

"So she said; but she wants rather more now. As you are aware, they generally do want rather more before you are done with them, and my wife's terms have advanced. She says, in short, that we must be asked to dinner, and that the big-wigs of the neighbourhood must be asked to meet us."

"Ah!" murmured the bishop, thinking what a good thing it was that Mr. Asher had paid in advance, and how uncertain of acceptance Mrs. Asher's advanced terms were. Presently he observed: "I am afraid I can hardly make any further representations to Lady Mount-Sorrel than I have made already."

"Oh, I don't suppose you can," was Mr. Asher's reply; "I wasn't going to suggest that you should. Besides, I take it that my wife is pretty well equipped for fighting her own battles by this time. She's got that invitation, unless I am much mistaken."

What, then, did the man want? For he evidently wanted something, and evidently experienced a difficulty in formulating his requirements. The so-called precincts at Blackhampton are restricted in area, and the bishop, led on by his interlocutor, who appeared restless and ill at ease, was now pacing along one of the most busy thoroughfares in the city.

"Perhaps," he tentatively remarked, "you are not quite as eager for the invitation as Mrs. Asher is?"

"Bless your soul! *I'm* not eager; I've no special respect or admiration for lords and ladies; I've seen far too much of them for that. As for my wife, I suppose she can't see too much of them. Or it may be that, like all women, she admires and respects nobody so profoundly as the people who trample

her under foot. Anyhow—there it is. She made it an indispensable condition that we should be asked to dinner, and how the deuce—saving your lordship's presence—was I to deal with her, except by acting as I did?"

"Really," answered the bishop, surveying him a little curiously, "I can't give an opinion without knowing how you acted. How, may I ask, did you act?"

Mr. Asher told him. It was strange, but it was evident, that the man had ridden or driven into Blackhampton and had attended afternoon service at the Cathedral with the deliberate intention of telling him, and the words with which he wound up his confession did not lack a certain pathos.

"I suppose," said he, "you think I behaved like a cad, don't you? I suppose you, as a minister of religion, would call that sort of behaviour unjustifiable, eh? A man of the world would, I know."

The bishop shook his head. "My dear sir," he replied, "religion is but indirectly concerned with such questions, and if you are asking me to absolve you, I must point out that absolution is, in all cases, conditional upon repentance, reparation, and amendment. You realize, I take it, the worldly point of view, which in this instance happens to coincide with the moral point of view, and which is, of course, that a man must not see or hear what he has no right to see or hear."

Mr. Asher plodded on in silence. Presently a closed carriage was driven swiftly past him and his companion, and from within it a pale-faced, anxious-eyed lady bent her head, the bishop raising his shovel hat in response, while Mr. Asher somewhat sheepishly followed suit.



"There she goes!" he growled. "I've no quarrel with her; as you quite truly say, I had no earthly right to give her away. But what is done is done, and it's rather too late to talk about reparation, I'm afraid. My excuse—perhaps you won't think much of it—is that I had to come to some understanding with my wife, or else run the risk of a permanent misunderstanding."

"Well, well," said the bishop, unable to suppress a short laugh. "And now, Mr. Asher, what is it that you wish me to do? It seems, from what you tell me, that you are ashamed of yourself. I am bound to say that I think you ought to be and that I am glad you are; but I hardly see how I or anybody else can help you to cancel the mischief that you have worked."

"O Lord, no! You might as well try to cancel the sunrise and sunset, like old Joshua, as to stop Isabella when once she has got her nose on a true scent. Only it occurred to me that you, being a friend of Lady Mount-Sorrel's, might say a word to her from me. You can tell her that I do hope and trust she will have the sense to invite us to dine and have done with it; then there will be no further trouble. But if she lays her ears back and refuses, you may say that I shall not proceed to extremities. In that case, you see, I shall have lost the game anyhow, for Isabella will certainly hook it out of the neighbourhood, and I don't care to take vengeance upon that unfortunate little woman, who has been having a rough time of it with her husband, as it is, I suspect."

"Unluckily," observed the bishop, "you have enabled Mrs. Asher to take vengeance upon her."

"Yes; but Mrs. Asher's assertions won't go for

much, unless I confirm them—which I won't. I'll say my eyes deceived me; I'll say I was drunk; I'll say anything that anybody likes. Vale couldn't have helped seeing what I saw, and Vale, as we know, has kept mum. Very well; I'm prepared to say ditto to Vale, who, if it comes to that, will swear that he saw nothing, I take it."

The bishop smiled and shook his head again. "Mr. Asher, I am afraid that you suffer, like most of us, from a sluggish conscience, and that you want, like a great many of us, to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. And it is to me, of all people—to the bishop of the diocese—that you apply for collaboration. Can anything be more clear than that I ought, both in duty and in prudence, to leave you severely alone?"

"But you are a good fellow, although you are a bishop—or, I should say, in addition to being a bishop," Mr. Asher boldly pleaded.

"Ah, what subtle flattery! Well, it so chances that I am going to stay at Mount-Sorrel to-night; and, if need should be, I will deliver your message to her ladyship. You understand, I am sure, that I can pledge myself to nothing, and that my conduct must be dictated entirely by circumstances."

"I have never yet," answered Mr. Asher, "met with anybody whose conduct was not dictated by circumstances. My own, as I have just told you, has been dictated by circumstances which I regret. I wonder whether you will have the generosity to acknowledge that, if you had been in my place, you would have let the cat out of the bag."

"Most certainly not," the bishop returned, laughing aloud. "I have enough to do to acknowledge the sins which I have actually committed without pro-

claiming that, under given conditions, I might have added to their number. But I perceive your mental attitude and I am obliged to you for it, as well as for your cheque; and I may, one of these days, call upon you to be as good as your word. Meanwhile, I will do what in me lies to procure that invitation for you."

He was in truth well disposed towards this queer penitent, who had pleased him by calling him a good fellow, and who appeared to be himself by no means such a bad fellow. It was extremely unfortunate, to be sure, that a weapon of offence had been placed in Mrs. Asher's hands which that lady might be expected to wield with energy; yet the consolatory, substantial fact remained that she had but a half-hearted backer in her husband. The bishop, being by nature an optimist, despite daily discouraging experiences, rubbed his hands and said to himself, as he had often said before, that there is more benevolence, more rectitude in the average human being than shows upon the surface.

Lady Mount-Sorrel, at all events, was an admitted model of benevolence and rectitude; so that, if he had been urged to accept her hospitality during the forty-eight hours which his episcopal duties required him to spend in that neighbourhood, he was entitled to take the integrity of her motives for granted. It is true that the language in which her note of invitation had been couched warned him of a certain amount of impending trouble. When Lady Mount-Sorrel wrote, "I am very desirous of conversing privately with you," she generally meant "I am very desirous of blowing you up sky-high." Still, as he had done nothing of late to vex the ever-umbrageous Church Association, he set forth without serious apprehen-

sions, and, on reaching his destination, he was warmly received by his hostess, who began:

"It is very good of you to come; but, to do you justice, you are always very good, although, if I may say so without disrespect to the high office which you hold, you are not always very wise."

"In what way," the bishop meekly inquired, "have I played the fool now?"

Lady Mount-Sorrel responded, without apparent relevance, "Angela Rowe will be here before dinner. She has proposed herself, and I'm sure I can't imagine why. That is, I most sincerely hope I can't; but people who should be old enough to know better are perpetually doing the most absurd and uncalled-for things. What do you think, for instance, of Mount-Sorrel's having deliberately put his eyes out the other day?"

"Put his eyes out!" exclaimed the bishop, aghast.

"Well, he hasn't permanently blinded himself, as it happens; but he was within an ace of it, the oculist says, and it would have served him right if he had had to go about with a dog and a string for the rest of his days."

"Did the oculist say that?"

"No; I said that, and I never spoke a truer word. Really, I cannot think that our powers of vision were given to us for the purpose of staring at the sun through a telescope, when there is so much upon the surface of our own earth which demands close inspection. However, he has escaped, for this time, with a dreadful bad headache and copious lotions and a green shade. I was going to speak to you about Angela Rowe. Oh, my dear friend, *why* don't you?"

"Why don't I do what?" the bishop asked.

"You know quite well. There she is, the very best wife that could have been devised for you, and if anybody in this world stands in need of a wife, you do. I believe you are fond of her; I am sure she is as fond of you as there is any necessity for her to be; yet you stand coolly looking on and allow her to throw herself away, out of pure good-nature, upon a young gaby like Ernest Glyn."

"Is she going to do that?"

"So they say, and so, for anything that I know to the contrary, she may be coming here this evening to announce. She admits, anyhow, that she has an announcement of some sort to make."

Evidently the old lady knew nothing as yet. Was it best to enlighten her or to leave that task to Mrs. Rowe? The bishop was debating this question while he meditatively stroked his nose, and had almost arrived at the conclusion that what must be said might as well be said forthwith, when Lord Mount-Sorrel came stumbling into the room, green shade and all.

"Is that you, bishop?" his lordship asked. "I can't distinguish anybody or anything at a distance of three yards, and even in order to obtain a foggy outline of objects I have to throw my head back as if I were trying to gargle, instead of carrying it, as I habitually do, at an acute forward angle."

"It seems," observed the bishop, "that you have landed yourself in your present plight by a pronounced departure from what you call your habit. I do trust that you will now leave the sun alone."

"I have got to leave him alone, worse luck," Lord Mount-Sorrel ruefully replied. "It is rather a severe punishment for a momentary inadvertence to be incapacitated like this, and at a moment which happens to be a singularly interesting one, too. But you, as

a theologian, must often have been puzzled—or doesn't it puzzle you?—by the disproportion between offences and their punishments which prevails under the sun."

"I am sometimes puzzled," the bishop confessed. "To tell you the truth, I am a little puzzled at this very moment with regard to a case upon which I was upon the point of consulting your mother."

"Oh, if you are going to discuss difficult cases, I'm off," said Lord Mount-Sorrel hurriedly; for indeed experience had taught him how undesirable it was to interfere between his mother and dilemmas which awaited solution.

But the bishop, laying a constraining hand upon his shoulder, forced him to sit down. "Don't go; I rely upon your common sense and your possible support, whereas I must not dare to look for anything but antagonism from Lady Mount-Sorrel."

Lady Mount-Sorrel gravely remarked that she must always and of necessity oppose what it was her duty to oppose, but that she had never before been accused of lacking common sense.

"I sincerely hope," returned the bishop, "that you will show no lack of it now; for I am afraid that if you do, disagreeable things may happen. I believe, however, that all unpleasantness will be avoided provided that you send out invitations for a big dinner, and include Mr. and Mrs. Asher among your guests. Do you feel able to consent to that?"

"Most certainly not," answered the old lady resolutely; "the time has not yet come for these people to be dined. Let them wait."

"Unfortunately, they won't wait. Mrs. Asher thinks that she has waited long enough, and she now threatens to go."

"Let her go, then. Surely her threatened de-

parture from the Red House—for I suppose that is what you mean—can't be called a particularly disagreeable possibility. Not to me, at any rate."

"Ah, but she threatens rather worse things than that," said the bishop, who proceeded, without further preface, to unfold his tale.

Lady Mount-Sorrel was visibly shocked and dismayed. Scandals occur from time to time in most families; but hers had hitherto enjoyed a remarkable immunity from them, and if, at the price of asking an underbred couple to dinner, she could screen her underserving grand-daughter and maintain the credit of the clan, it might perhaps behoove her to come to terms. At the same time, she hated being driven into a corner.

"This," said she, "would be most disgraceful, most inexcusable on Barbara's part, if it were true; but we have only Mr. Asher's word for the truth of the story, after all, and it appears from what you tell us that he is not even prepared to stick to his word."

"Well, I call that generous of him," remarked the bishop; "and it entitles him, in my view, to some consideration. What do you think, Mount-Sorrel?"

"Oh, if you ask me," answered Lord Mount-Sorrel, "I think he ought to be told that we don't believe one solitary word of his yarn. And then, I think, he and his wife ought to be invited to dinner."

The bishop nodded approvingly; but Lady Mount-Sorrel shook her head.

"Why, since we disbelieve the man, are we to reward him for his impudence?"

"Well, I don't myself see any other way of closing his wife's mouth," Lord Mount-Sorrel replied. "I have no pretension to be a judge in matters of this sort; but I presume that she will chatter, unless she is stopped, and I presume that you would rather

she didn't chatter. However, there isn't any immediate hurry, and you tell me that we are to have the pleasure of seeing Mrs. Rowe this evening. Why not consult Mrs. Rowe, whose advice is always sound?"

Lady Mount-Sorrel, after a moment of deliberation, acquiesced. "Very well; we will lay the case before Angela: it concerns her in more ways than one. We may even render her a valuable service by opening her eyes to the true character of that extraordinarily silly and tiresome young man. But as for following her advice, I don't promise to do that. She herself is, at times, too silly and too tiresome for anything."

At this appropriate juncture the door was thrown open and Mrs. Rowe was announced.



## CHAPTER XXI

### DIVERS MOODS

ERNEST GLYN'S retreat from Southacre, which, as will be remembered, was effected somewhat abruptly, left his hostess to deal as best she might with an interrogator whose tender years made him difficult to suppress. Well informed or partially informed persons of mature age may be answered and put to silence without being told anything—the House of Commons affords daily proof of this consoling possibility—but children have an odious habit of reiterating direct questions until they receive unequivocal replies, and Dicky, although a nice child, generally speaking, made himself altogether odious that afternoon. He wanted to know, and had to be informed, what the date of his father's last letter was; he wanted to know (but upon this point, to be sure, he obtained no enlightenment) what Mr. Glyn had been saying to make his mother's eyes so red; he was likewise desirous of ascertaining why, if there was nothing to cry about, Miss Beamish had been moved to tempestuous weeping. In short, he was, as Barbara told him that he was, aggravating enough to make the most indulgent of parents deplore the day of his birth.

"I do wish," she exclaimed plaintively at last, "you would go away and play at something with Di, who, I know, would play quite placidly over my grave, and

your father's too, if we were in them. It is not possible, Dicky, to be more naughty than you are when you set to work to plague your elders, who have a hundred worries already about which you can't understand anything."

Dicky was blandly of opinion that those worries might be, and ought to be, communicated to him. Then, he observed, he would know what was the matter and would cease to be a plague. But there were obvious obstacles in the way of compliance with that modest demand, and his mother, being at the end of her patience, dismissed him peremptorily.

Then she rang the bell and sent for Miss Beamish, upon whom she fell, tooth and nail.

"I don't," she began, "wish to be rude or disagreeable; but I must say that you are the most extraordinarily inconsiderate person I have ever met in the whole course of my life. I really do not think there can be another living being who would have deliberately put such a notion into the children's heads as that something dreadful had happened to their father."

Miss Beamish penitently acknowledged that she had been very much to blame. She pleaded, however, in particular extenuation of her offence, that it had at least not been deliberate, and that she would have told Dicky nothing, had he not pressed her so hard.

"He noticed my distress, and—you know what a clever boy he is. There is no putting him off or deceiving him."

"Noticed your distress!" returned Barbara irritably; "I should think he did. It wouldn't require a particularly clever boy to detect that obstreperous sort of distress. When people choose to make noises like the sea-lions at the zoo, they aren't, one must assume,

actuated by a different desire to escape notice. The annoying and unnecessary part of it is that you should be distressed at all. May I ask whether, by any chance, you have lost your heart to my husband?"

"O Mrs. Vale," protested the poor woman, covered with confusion, "how can you say such things!"

"I was only trying to account for your amazing behaviour. Look at me: am I distressed or alarmed? Yet I suppose I should have rather more right than you to be both, if there were the slightest excuse for my being either."

"I most sincerely hope, dear Mrs. Vale," answered Miss Beamish, with heart-rending humility, "that you are in the right and that I am in the wrong."

"It is beyond all question," retorted Barbara snapshly, "that you must be in the wrong. Whether Denis is alive or dead—and he is most unquestionably alive—you have no business to frighten the children with cock and bull stories; nor can I imagine what connection there is between such stories and their education, which *is*, or is supposed to be, your business. Please don't let this sort of thing occur again."

Miss Beamish, whose means of earning her livelihood seemed to be at stake, meekly withdrew, and Barbara felt as ashamed as most of us feel when we have vented our ill-humour upon our subordinates. But then they ought not, as they so frequently do, to tread on the tails of our coats. It is neither just nor generous of them to treat us in that way, when they must be perfectly well aware of our disabilities, and Barbara's self-reproach did not survive a disturbed night. She awoke, on the morrow, to oblivion of Miss Beamish, of Dicky, of the obstinately silent Denis, and to acute consciousness of the pretty pass to which she had been

brought by Mr. Asher's baseness and Ernest Glyn's poltroonery. Over this she brooded and fretted throughout the morning, and in the afternoon, being no longer able to chew the cud of her trouble in solitude, she had herself driven to Brayton Lodge.

"Angela," she mused on the way, "is a pig, and I shall not like begging her pardon a bit; but needs must when that hateful Jew and his wife drive. I can't endure to be left in suspense as to what is going to be done next, and I can't sanction revelations to granny."

She was compelled, nevertheless, to sanction those revelations. Mrs. Rowe, whom she found preparing to set forth for Mount-Sorrel, and who received her somewhat ungracious apologies more patiently than cordially, convinced her in a few words that she had no choice.

"You see," that clear-headed lady observed, "our one and only chance is to frighten your grandmother, and she won't be frightened unless she is told the facts. The facts don't redound to your credit; but that is nobody's fault except your own, and you ought to be thankful that a dinner-party may suffice to keep them permanently suppressed. If you are scolded—well, you deserve to be scolded, and I really can't pity you. How much worse off you might have been if Mrs. Asher had been an unambitious woman, and if we had had no bribe to hold out to her."

"I don't see," returned Barbara, "how an innocent person could be much worse off or much more cruelly treated than I have been; and I think you are horribly unsympathizing."

The perennial fount of Angela's sympathy was indeed threatening to run dry. She felt, at any rate, disinclined, after all that had come and gone, to give

verbal expression to it, and when she learned—as of course she presently did—some details respecting Ernest Glyn's late visit to Southacre, she almost lost her temper into the bargain.

"One would think," she exclaimed, "that you were absolutely bent upon making a troublesome business more troublesome than it need be! Why will you persist in talking as though you cared a straw about that very selfish and commonplace young man? Is it possible that you don't even now see him in his true colours?"

"Oh, I see him as you paint him," answered Barbara; "you have taken such pains to exhibit him to me under that aspect, that I should have to be colour-blind if I didn't. All the same, I am fond of him, and perhaps I know him just a little better than you do. I should be even more fond of him than I am if he had punched Mr. Asher's head when he was asked; but that, after all, is only a detail."

"Denis," observed Angela musingly, "would have punched Mr. Asher's head."

"Would he? But, as a matter of fact, he didn't."

"Of course he didn't. While he was here, Mr. Asher didn't invite punishment."

"Oh, it wasn't that; it was only that he was indifferent to everything, except the necessity for keeping up appearances. He hasn't, after all, kept them up so conspicuously well, and I am rather tired of playing second fiddle to such a heedless leader. I have a great mind to throw my cap over the mill and snap my fingers in granny's face."

"You will do nothing of the sort," returned Angela calmly. "I doubt your being given the opportunity, and I am sure that, in any case, you won't take it."

You wouldn't be here now if you meditated anything rash."

"Why do you suppose that I am here now?" Barbara defiantly asked.

"I would rather not make you angry again by telling you; but I hope you won't mind my assuring you that I am worthy of trust. One of these days you may even think me worthy of gratitude."

Perhaps, in her heart of hearts, Barbara thought so already; but who enjoys being laid under an obligation? She said to herself that Angela Rowe was insufferably self-righteous, and she said aloud that, as one whom she had imagined to be her friend was evidently dying to get rid of her, she might as well drive on to Blackhampton and do some shopping. Not being implored to reconsider that decision, she gave immediate effect to it, and was soon on her way towards the smoky manufacturing town which was occasionally favoured by her patronage.

Angela Rowe, it must be owned, might have behaved more kindly to a sore and sorry fellow-creature; but no human being is absolutely perfect, and Angela, who had a ticklish job before her and the memory of many exasperating trials behind her, was, for once, out of patience. Barbara, therefore, sat humped up in a corner of her brougham, like a naughty child, as she was, and reflected bitterly that in all the wide cold world there was nobody who loved her. Except, to be sure, Ernest Glyn, who probably did care for her, although he appeared to have no stomach for fighting her battles.

Driving through the streets of Blackhampton she espied the bishop, deeply engaged in conversation with Mr. Asher. "What a queer couple to be laying their heads together," she thought, and bowed to them.

She fancied that the bishop, in returning her salute, had a grave, accusing air, while Mr. Asher looked unmistakably confused and sheepish. No doubt they were talking about her; no doubt everybody would be talking about her soon; and this sop, in the shape of a dinner-party, which it was proposed to throw to the wolves from Mount-Sorrel would at best be worth no more to her than a respite. Yet she had been guilty of no sin. According to Angela Rowe, who ought to have known better and really did know better, she deserved to be afflicted; but it was, in truth, Denis who deserved affliction—Denis, who was disporting himself in distant Africa; who did not care whether his wife was guilty or not, so long as public scandal was avoided, and who could not even be at the pains of inquiring whether she was alive or dead. In her haste and her profound self-pity, she exclaimed:

"I only wish *he* were dead, as that silly old sentimental Beamish pretends to think that he is. Then it would all be plain sailing."

She was a little ashamed of her words immediately after they had passed her lips, especially as she was all alone. In the presence of others the most atrocious sentiments, which are not really meant, may be proclaimed without remorse, and even with satisfaction; but it becomes more serious when we go the length of announcing them to ourselves. Barbara, however, was seldom serious for many minutes together, nor was there any traceable sequence in the thoughts and moods which swept across her rather shallow little soul, moving it in this or that direction, as fitful breezes stir the surface of a pool. She made her purchase, which did not take her long, and then, as it was customary for the horses to be put up after a drive into Blackhampton, betook herself to the Crown Hotel,

where she ordered a private room and tea. The aspect of a private sitting-room in a British provincial hotel is, under any circumstance, enough to sadden the most cheerful of mortals, and her spirits, momentarily raised by the small excitement of choosing new chintzes for the Southacre bed-rooms, sank lower and lower while she sat gazing out through unclean window-panes upon a darkening street, where busy folks were hurrying to and fro, and sparse gas-lamps were beginning to be lighted. She envied these toiling, uninteresting, unlovely wayfarers, and, although it is certain that she would have died rather than change places with any one of them, she audibly wished herself in their shoes. They, at least, she reflected (and she may have been right), had no time for realizing what a miserable world this is; they had to work hard in order to keep themselves in existence, and were probably vexed by no doubts as to whether it is worth anybody's while to remain alive. Of course it was not, and could not be, worth while to live in Blackhampton; yet the lot of a woman who was young, pretty, comparatively rich, and the mistress of a charming place like Southacre, ought surely—that was where the bitterness came in—to be a happy one. And it was not. She had failed completely as a wife; she was no brilliant success as a mother; she was in danger of being publicly slighted and sneered at; and she was denied even the poor consolation of having enjoyed some equivalent for the penalty of social obloquy. Her moods, it has been said, lacked continuity; but perhaps it was a logical enough result of such musings that she should abruptly seize a sheet of note-paper and scribble a few hasty lines upon it to Ernest Glyn.

"I am afraid," she wrote, "that I was horribly rude



and rather unjust to you yesterday. Please forgive me and come and see me again; I can't afford to quarrel with the only person who cares a bit about me. Besides, I have no quarrel with you. It was not your fault that Mr. Asher saw what he saw, and nothing that you can do now is likely to deter Mrs. Asher from making hay with my character. It isn't an invitation to dinner—which I don't believe she will get—that will put her to silence. So nothing matters any longer, and I am tired of this perpetual, useless playing at propriety. You will find me at home any and every afternoon. Your visits can hardly compromise me more than I am already compromised, and they may amuse me. I do so *dreadfully* want to be amused."

That last cry, more truthful than flattering to the person addressed, came from her heart. She committed it to paper partly by reason of its uncontrollable veracity, partly because she wished to warn Ernest Glyn against taking too much for granted; but she was quite aware that the missive which she presently handed to the waiter and requested him to post was a terribly indiscreet one. Otherwise, to be sure, there would have been no great pleasure to be got out of despatching it.

The greasy waiter, after depositing an uninviting tea-tray, departed to carry out Mrs. Vale's orders, but returned in a few minutes bearing the London evening papers, which had just arrived, and which, as he considerably mentioned, gave the winners of the 'Urst Park steeplechase. Barbara was not interested in the Hurts Park meeting, nor, as she glanced absent-mindedly at the journal left with her, did she take in the meaning of a leading article designed to make the Government of the day shake in its boots; but presently her wandering eye fell upon a paragraph

which caused her to start violently and catch her breath. It was headed Reported Disaster to a Shooting Expedition in East Africa, and ran as follows:

"A rumour has reached Aden that a party of English sportsmen, who have been recently shooting big game in Somaliland, and who were last heard of in the extreme south of that protectorate, has encountered a hostile force—presumably of Abyssinians—and that every member of the expedition, with the exception of two camelmen, who contrived to effect their escape, has perished. The story rests at present solely upon the evidence of these fugitives; but there are, unhappily, good grounds for giving credence to it, and the resident at Berbera, who appears to have particularly cautioned the travellers against exceeding the boundaries of British influence, entertains little hope of their safety. The names of our fellow-countrymen, whose death, we fear, must be regarded as highly probable, if not certain, are——" Appended was a list of names, including that of "Mr. Denis Vale, of Southacre, Trentshire, a well-known and universally popular figure in sporting and other circles."

Barbara dropped the newspaper, while her heart thumped against her ribs for a few beats and then stood still. Her atrocious wish had been granted, then. Denis was dead—Denis, whom she had treated so badly, with whom she had been so furious, and whom she could so easily have forgiven, if she had not loved him through it all. Denis was dead, and she was free, should it so please her, to marry Ernest Glyn, whom she had never loved for a moment, to whom she had just posted a summons which admitted of only one interpretation, and whom, with swift injustice, she accused of having brought about all her misfortunes. It has been said that if Heaven were

only cruel enough to give us all that we insanely ask for, the world would contain an even larger number of despairing inhabitants than it does. That may or may not be the case, and perhaps few of us would be unwilling to take our chance of disappointment; but upon Barbara Vale, at all events, Nemesis fell with dramatic promptitude.

"Oh," she exclaimed, wringing her hands, "why didn't I tell him! Why didn't somebody tell him? Why didn't Angela, who has seen from the first how things really were, tell him? And now he will never know! Now he has been murdered, and murdered, to all intents and purposes, by me!"

That Ernest Glyn might be regarded as a participator in, if not the instigator of, her crime was cold comfort. Cold was the comfort that could be derived from any belated remorse and futile attempt to transfer the weight of her burden, or a portion of it, to other shoulders. Like the impetuous, undisciplined being that she was, she flew to the bell, called up the waiter, the landlord, anybody who would listen to her, and made a scene which was subsequently described by the local prints as "in the highest degree painful and distressing." If she did not inform all these good people, who strove in vain to calm her, she alone was responsible for her husband's fate, nothing but good luck and broken, incoherent articulation preserved her from thus betraying herself. She insisted upon telegraphing at once to the Foreign Office, the Colonial Office, the Indian Office.

"Oh, not that there is the faintest hope of his being alive; only they must have heard, and they ought to have let me hear, that he is dead."

It was pointed out to her that a newspaper paragraph is not proof positive, and that the newspaper

itself only professed to give the rumour for what it might be worth; but she turned a deaf ear to such well-meant representations. Her husband was dead; she knew that he was dead, and she wished with all her heart that she had never been born.

She was at length got into her carriage and sent off home, leaving behind her a group of sincerely edified sympathizers who were at least unlikely (if it had occurred to her to think about that) to believe in any calumnies which might now be spread abroad by Mrs. Asher. She had behaved absurdly; yet, without intending it, she had achieved for herself more than Angela Rowe and others who wished her well could have accomplished on her behalf.

## CHAPTER XXII

### GEORGE HALLETT'S BENEFIT

"I WONDER," said Lord Mount-Sorrel, advancing to meet Mrs. Rowe, when she was shown into his presence and that of his mother and the Bishop of Blackhampton, "whether your ears are burning as much as my eyes are. They ought to be."

"Have you been praising or vilifying me?" she inquired.

"I have been extolling you," his lordship replied; "I never neglect an opportunity of doing so. Others, who shall be nameless, have been applying adjectives to you which I won't repeat and which I am quite sure you have done nothing to earn. After saying that, it seems only common prudence on my part to retire and bathe my sun-smitten eyes. I leave you with confidence to fight your own battle and somebody else's battle, knowing what your charities are. Any moral support that I could lend you would be superfluous, and might, for all I can tell, prove embarrassing."

Perhaps the bishop was of much the same mind, for he almost immediately rose and followed his host out of the room upon the pretext that he had letters to read and write. Thus Lady Mount-Sorrel, left alone with the newcomer, was free to remark:

"My dear, I was saying, when you came in, that

you are sometimes silly and tiresome. I speak of people to their faces as I speak of them behind their backs; so my son's allusion does not in the least disconcert me. I only hope that you are not here for the purpose of justifying my words."

"I am afraid," Angela replied, "that I am here for the purpose of being rather tiresome; but I don't think I am going to be silly. There is nothing silly, surely, in begging you to save you grand-daughter from an awkward predicament."

"Oh, is that it? Well, the bishop has been telling me all about that. You didn't come, then, to give me the news of your betrothal to Ernest Glyn?"

"Dear Lady Mount-Sorrel, for what do you take me? I may—for reasons which you will understand, since the bishop appears to have enlightened you—have thought it worth while to hoodwink Mr. Ernest Glyn; but I never flattered myself that I could throw dust in your clear eyes. However, there is an end now of my little stratagem, such as it was, and your turn has come to avert a threatened calamity. How did the bishop get wind of it?"

"His information came from headquarters," the old lady replied. "That man Asher, who must be something of a sacerdotalist as well as a Hebrew—after all, the Jews are a superstitious race—has been making a species of confession to him, he tells me, and is more or less ashamed of himself. Well may he be, I'm sure; and well may Barbara be, the little wretch! If we had only Mr. Asher to reckon with, I doubt whether it would be necessary for me to undergo the humiliation of vouching to the county for an underbred couple; but his wife, whom he has so inexcusably taken into his confidence, may be less easy to manage."

Angela shook her head. "You will find Mrs. Asher unmanageable, except on her own terms."

"So I am given to understand. At the same time it is a question with me whether, for the sake of screening a sinner from the just consequences of her sin, I am entitled to neglect the duties belonging to that station in life to which it has pleased God to call me."

"Entitled or not," answered Angela, "I should ask the Ashers to dinner, if I were you. As for Barbara's being a sinner——"

"My dear woman, you are not going to defend her, I hope!"

"No; only her sin was nothing like as bad in reality as Mrs. Asher can make it sound. Moreover, we ought to consider Denis, who has kept silence under great provocation, and perhaps you yourself are worthy of some consideration."

Lady Mount-Sorrel had, at any rate, no doubt as to that. She had, in truth, pretty well made up her mind to despatch the solicited invitation, and only wished to be furnished with incentives for so doing which might enable her to yield without too visible capitulation. These Angela was sufficiently cute to supply.

"You have already called upon Mrs. Asher," she remarked, "and in the ordinary course of things your call would be followed, after an interval, by an invitation card. If you depart from your ordinary practice, you imply that the Ashers have in some way annoyed you, and I am sure you cannot wish to pay them that compliment. It is unfortunate, of course, that you did not ask them before they asked to be asked; but you are not supposed to know that they have put forward a demand, and, unless they are extremely silly, they won't appear to think that you know. It

does not at all follow, either, from your showing them customary civility, that you accept Mr. Asher's story as true."

The old lady promptly seized the point which had commended itself earlier in the afternoon to her son's intelligence.

"Since you put it in that way," said she, looking Angela steadily in the face, "I may say that, all things considered, I do *not* accept the truth of that story. It appears to me to require confirmation. That Barbara has been most foolish and imprudent is only too likely, and I shall have something to say to her upon the subject; but we are not justified in condemning her upon such tainted evidence as has come to our ears. On the other hand, I am inclined to agree with you that these people might possibly misinterpret any apparent reluctance on my part to treat them in accordance with precedent. They had better have their card."

It was written for them, addressed to them, and sent out to be posted without more ado: Lady Mount-Sorrel seldom wasted time when once she had decided upon a course of action. This may account for the promptitude with which she now left the room, and it is not altogether unlikely that the bishop's reappearance in the course of a few minutes was due to benevolent suggestion on her part. Be that as it may, she had evidently sought him out during the interval, for the first thing that he said was:

"Well, I congratulate you. The fact is accomplished, I hear."

"Oh, yes," answered Angela; "as far as that goes, we may all congratulate ourselves. Whether one is at the end of one's difficulties yet is another question."

The bishop laughed. "If you controlled, or



ostensibly controlled, a diocese, you would know better than to create gratuitous difficulties for yourself. According to Lady Mount-Sorrel, however, you mean to cut the knot of one of them by declining to marry Mr. Ernest Glyn."

"Did you really ever suppose that I meant to do anything else?"

"No; but I think I can recall instances of your having done things which you did not set out with the intention of doing. That is, indeed, just what inspires me with certain hopes."

"Hopes?" echoed Angela, with a suddenly startled and anxious countenance.

"How quick you are! Yes, as I see you guess, our dear old friend here has been urging considerations upon me which I have no doubt she has more than once urged upon you, and I am bound to confess that there is a good deal in what she says. Some people—bishops among others, I daresay—are sure to be happier, easier, more generally useful, married than single, and——"

"Oh, don't say that!" interrupted Angela, in great distress. "You know how I love and respect and admire you; but who ever heard of a bishop's wife following the hounds? And hunt I must if I am to go on coping with all the daily worries and perplexities of life. Besides, even if I were fitted or worthy to be your wife, I couldn't—it would be impossible——"

"That is just as well," observed the bishop composedly, "because I wasn't going to ask you. Nevertheless, as I was saying when you jumped to such a hasty conclusion, I have hopes on your behalf and on somebody else's behalf. What, if I may be allowed the use of an American idiom in private intercourse,

is the matter with George Hallett? Now don't tell me that you are not fond of him."

"I should never dream," answered Angela, whose rosy confusion the bishop thought himself entitled to enjoy, "of saying anything so untrue. Of course I am fond of him; but for that very reason——"

"Ah, exactly! For that very reason you must needs spoil his life. He is too much of a man, I grant you, to let his life be literally spoilt; but, owing to you, he gets very little of the pleasure out of it that he deserves, and he will get less and less as years go on. The truth is that you have indulged in the luxury of self-sacrifice to such a degree that you can't so much as contemplate now the idea of doing what you want to do."

"But I don't want to marry George Hallett," Angela protested.

"Oh, excuse me, my dear friend; I know you. If you hadn't wanted to marry him, you would have been Mrs. Hallett long ago. There was more danger than you are willing to allow of your becoming Mrs. Ernest Glyn. I believe—Heaven forgive me!—that if I had dropped upon my episcopal knees just now and burst into tears you would have consented to espouse me, and would have set to work immediately to explain how glad you were to have an excuse for abandoning field sports."

"You are completely mistaken," Angela was beginning, when the butler came in to ask whether she could speak for a minute to Mr. Hallett, who was waiting in the hall and wished to see her alone.

The bishop smiled and raised his eyebrows at this dramatically opportune announcement; but Angela's swifter instinct divined that George's present errand was not of an amatory nature. It could scarcely be

supposed that he was in such a hurry as all that, nor was it likely that he would have selected the entrance-hall at Mount-Sorrel for the scene for an offer of marriage.

"I am sure he brings bad news!" she exclaimed. "I am sure he has heard that something has happened to Denis Vale."

She had not long to wait for confirmation of that presentiment. George Hallett's tall figure, in covert-coat and leather leggings, strode forth from the gloom to meet her as she hurried out into the vast, echoing hall, which was but half lighted by hanging lamps and a fire of blazing logs, and, without even greeting her, he said:

"I was told that you were here, so I thought I had better ask for you in the first instance. You haven't seen the evening papers, I suppose? There is a statement, which I am afraid sounds like the truth, that Vale and his friends have been attacked and massacred in East Africa."

He explained that he had ridden over from Blackhampton, where he had heard how the evil tidings had already reached Mrs. Vale, and added: "There wouldn't have been much use in my following her: it is kinder, upon the whole, not to arouse hopes which may never be fulfilled. But perhaps my coming here may save Lady Mount-Sorrel from a shock. I don't mind saying to her and to you that I don't despair yet."

He spoke in a rather hard, metallic voice, which he had perfectly under control, and which, as Angela knew, gave the measure of his emotion. Denis Vale and he had always been close friends, and there was probably no other man whose removal would leave so great a blank in his somewhat solitary life. It

was, therefore, only natural that he should remain calm, while she, after reading the newspaper paragraph, could repress neither her tears nor her fears.

"Do you really think there is a chance?" she asked.

"Yes; there are several chances. What they may be worth time alone can show. One can't implicitly take the word of runaways, who are bound to make the worst of any situation from which they have bolted. I doubt whether Abyssinians, who are not savages, would massacre men who might be worth a good deal to them as prisoners. Then, again, Vale may have left his friends before the fight—for I presume there must have been some sort of a fight—occurred."

"Only then we should surely have had a telegram from him by this time."

"Well, probably; not necessarily. Personally, I don't despair, because I won't; but I daresay Mrs. Vale had better despair—that is, if she considers her husband's death a desperate misfortune. She edified them all immensely at the Crown Hotel, I hear, by the hullabaloo that she raised over it."

"Poor soul!" exclaimed Angela compassionately. "You don't like her, I know; but she isn't what you think she is."

"Isn't she? Well, perhaps not. Perhaps it wasn't she who drove Vale out of the country; perhaps she has some natural affections, and perhaps she has a conscience. Anyhow, it doesn't signify what I think of her, nor, I must confess, does it signify much to me what becomes of her."

Lord Mount-Sorrel, groping his way towards the staircase to dress for dinner, caught the sound of voices and joined the couple. In a few words he

was informed of the alleged catastrophe; whereupon he at once proclaimed himself on the sanguine side.

"Hope," he very sensibly observed, "never injured anybody, and the newspapers have killed many a man before now who is still alive and well. Within a few days, at the outside, we ought to receive more trustworthy news. Meanwhile, let us assume—why shouldn't we?—that the whole story is false. You'll stay and dine with us, won't you, Hallett?"

George declined hospitality, pleading his attire as an excuse; but it may be that reasons of his own rendered him not unwilling to be overpersuaded; for he ended by yielding to entreaties in which his aid was invoked for the purpose of tranquillizing Lady Mount-Sorrel.

"My mother," Lord Mount-Sorrel declared, "will certainly assume that poor Vale is no more, and when there is a death in the family she invariably, as a sign of sorrow, takes to her bed, which is very bad for her. As for me, she pays no more attention to anything that I say than she would to the chattering of a parrot; but if you, whom she regards as a level-headed man, point out to her that mere unauthenticated rumours are not facts, very likely she will consent to eat her dinner and drink her half glass of port after it, as usual."

Lady Mount-Sorrel, in the sequel, was prevailed upon to eat and drink; but she was unaffectedly distressed, and she shook her head at George Hallett's cheerful predictions, which were not, in truth, very well supported by his facial expression, as seen in a strong light. She said:

"It may be our duty to hope for the best; but we should have a poor supply of common sense among us if we did not anticipate the worst. Trage-

dies of this kind are not invented, and my experience throughout a long life has been that what is whispered to-day will be confirmed to-morrow. I don't know whether his lordship will bear me out or not."

The bishop said that, although he could not pretend to compete with Lady Mount-Sorrel in length or variety of experience, he had lived long enough to acquire a healthy disbelief in whispers; but it was evident that he shared in the general despondency which nobody would verbally admit, and the dinner, despite all efforts, proved a melancholy repast. When it was over, and when the two ladies had retired, the elder observed to her companion:

"If this sobers Barbara and fills her with remorse, some good may, after all, come out of evil; but I cannot help foreseeing that she is likely to be a troublesome widow."

Scarcely more troublesome than she had shown herself in the character of a wife, thought Angela, who, however, only said aloud: "It will be time enough to worry when we are sure that she is a widow. I can't bring myself to believe that Denis is dead."

"I can't bring myself to believe that he is alive," returned Lady Mount-Sorrel gloomily. "The dealings of Providence with us are beyond our limited comprehension; we must bow to them in humble submission and try to believe that all is ordered for our eventual welfare. Still, it does sometimes seem as if indispensable persons are taken and useless ones left. How easily, for instance, the world could have dispensed with young Glyn, who did have a fever and might just as well have died of it. The next thing, no doubt, will be that we shall have him proposing to share Barbara's jointure." She paused,

sighed heavily, and resumed with the air of one who is resolved to put a good face upon a sorry business. "At any rate, we can entertain nobody here for many months to come, and that invitation to Mr. and Mrs. Asher will have to be cancelled."

George Hallett, who, with the other men, was not long in joining the ladies, was less unconsciously cynical, if he was also less amusing. He drew Angela aside and said:

"Don't be down-hearted; we can't afford to be down-hearted, happen what may. If Vale hasn't been murdered, he may be rescued, and if he can't be rescued, he may at least be avenged. I will make that my business."

"How can you?" Angela asked. "In former times it would have been the Government's business to rescue or avenge him; but the Government accepts no responsibility nowadays for foolhardy travellers."

"Of course it doesn't," George answered, "and quite right, too. That is why I am going out to Somaliland, in an irresponsible capacity, as soon as ever I can get a few fellows to join me and collect a supply of arms and ammunition. There won't be any trouble about that; I can put my hand at once upon half a dozen men who will delight in the job, and we will enlist all the natives we shall want on the coast. We shall start ostensibly in pursuit of lions; but I promise you that we won't return without a human bag, dead or living."

This wild project commended itself in no way to Angela, who exclaimed: "You must not think of making such an attempt. It sounds downright crazy."

"I daresay it does," he composedly rejoined. "All the same, it is going to be attempted without more loss of time than is unavoidable. It may be doubtful

whether I shall do much good in Somaliland; but it is quite certain that I can't sit still in Trentshire doing nothing, and I don't propose to take any fathers of families with me. If the whole lot of us are wiped out we shall not be missed."

"I don't think," protested Angela, "that it is very kind of you to say that."

"Where does the unkindness come in? Your kindness prompts you to suggest that you would miss me; but don't I know better? Haven't I had my final answer from you? and haven't I acquiesced in it? Friendship is all very well; I am not ungrateful, and I don't complain. Only, to speak plainly, it won't do. I have tried to make it do, and I find that it won't. Besides, I have never had a truer friend than Vale, who, for all I know, may be badly in need of me at this moment."

The bishop's paradoxical estimate of her recurred to Angela's memory. Was it because this man loved her, and because she did not love him, that she felt impelled to bestow upon him what he no longer directly implored? Or was it for an altogether different reason that she shrank from doing anything of the sort? However that may have been, she steered a middle course, and, laying her fingers upon his sleeve, murmured, "Don't go."

"You may take my word for it," he answered, "that I shall go. I have told you because I want you to know, and because it isn't at all impossible that I may succeed; but I would rather you didn't mention it to our friends here, or indeed to anybody. You can understand that the less an expedition of this kind is talked about the better."

Before Angela could make any rejoinder Lady Mount-Sorrel interrupted a colloquy which no occa-



sion of renewing presented itself during the remainder of the evening. Perhaps no member of the small party at Mount-Sorrel slept very soundly that night; but the most restless and the most unhappy being under that roof, beyond doubt, was Angela Rowe, who kept repeating wearily to herself throughout the long, silent hours: "He will have to go, even if he goes to his death. The only way of stopping him would be to tell him that I love him, and I can't do that. For one thing, it would not be fair to poor Denis, and, for another thing, he would never believe me now."

## CHAPTER XXIII

### BARBARA TELLS THE TRUTH

ONE of the chief characteristics which are supposed to distinguish the masculine from the feminine sex in animals, human and other, is the greater combativeness of the former. There are obvious reasons why this should be so, and no doubt, in a broad, practical sense, it is so; yet everybody who has studied either his own species or those which are held to be inferior to it, must have noticed that, whereas the male is glad enough to fight upon dire occasion, the female is infinitely more prone towards a general attitude of opposition, and that the surest way of driving her into differing from you is to agree with her. Thus Barbara Vale, who had scouted the well-meant representations put forward by the landlord and landlady of the Crown Hotel, and who had maintained that there could not be the shadow of a question as to her husband's fate, abruptly took the other side when she reached home with her sad tidings, and when Miss Beamish, dissolved in tears, exclaimed, "Ah, I knew how it must be!"

"You did not know," Barbara resentfully returned, "and you do not know. The only certain thing is that two men who, by their own confession, ran away to save their skins, assert that the whole party was cut to pieces. How can they tell? They didn't

wait to see, and cowards are always liars. For my part, I shall refuse to believe their story until it is borne out by some better authority."

"With all my heart I hope you are right, dear Mrs. Vale," sighed the weeping governess; "but I cannot think so—indeed I cannot."

"That is because you don't want to think so," retorted Barbara, with pardonable indignation. "You want—Heaven only knows why—to make out that a man who never intentionally injured you or anybody else has been stupidly murdered by a gang of savages with whom he had no quarrel; and you are eager, I know, to hurry off and tell the children that they have lost their father. But I forbid you to do anything of the sort. I forbid you to say one word, and I myself shall not say one word to them upon the subject. I have always tried to be kind to you, Miss Beamish; I think you will admit that I have never been tyrannical or dictatorial; but in this instance I expect to be obeyed, if you please."

That little encounter did her a great deal of good. It enabled her, despite intermittent sinkings of the heart, to keep up appearances through the evening; it enabled her to get some sleep at night; it even braced her to set an obstinate face against the inevitable dejection which attends recovered consciousness. Denis was dead; she was sure, or almost sure, of that. Nevertheless, neither Miss Beamish nor the irresponsible editor of a London evening journal could be sure of it, and while there is uncertainty there is hope. She went downstairs to breakfast with a certain air of defiance, resolved upon making no sign to the servants, who of course had received information from the coachman, and whose respectful, inarticulate sympathy she stared out of countenance.

However, she was not quite self-reliant enough to do without Angela Rowe. In the course of the morning a groom was sent to Mount-Sorrel with a note to that trusty, if recently harsh, friend, briefly telling her of what she already perhaps knew, and begging her to come over to Southacre at once. She might be depended upon, the writer thought, to respond to such a summons; there was this to be said for her that she was not the woman to turn her back on those in distress.

Oddly enough, Barbara had clean forgotten another summons which she had despatched on the previous afternoon, and to which some speedy response was due. The recipient thereof would have been much relieved had he been made aware of her oblivion; for, indeed, he did not at all know what he ought to do under the difficult circumstances, and he spent the entire morning in a state of dire perplexity. It must be confessed that Ernest Glyn's first emotion, on hearing (the whole county heard of it in a surprisingly short space of time) that Denis Vale was no more, was one of pure joy. The thing seemed so timely, so simplifying, so Heaven-sent. But this young man had never been, save within more or less discreet limits, the slave of his emotions, and, upon calmer reflection, he began to doubt whether he was as abundantly blessed as he had appeared to be at first sight. He was, to be sure, a good deal (no longer desperately) in love with his charming Barbara; but marriage, after all, as every sensible person must allow, is apt to remove all the bloom from romance, and he was not convinced that she would be an altogether easy partner to live with. Angela Rowe, on the other hand, would be delightful to live with—lenient, sympathetic, unexact, besides being con-

siderably better off than Denis Vale's widow could expect to be. Those step-children, too, who were likely to be an immediate nuisance and might well prove an ultimate curse. It really was a case for looking before leaping. Then, by the early post, came her letter, which, although written, of course, in ignorance of her bereavement, lost nothing of its cogency on that account.

"I am in for it," Ernest mused, half-ruefully, half-exultingly; "I am absolutely in for it. I don't know what it is, but it seems as if there must be something about me which they can't resist. And I myself am so seldom anxious to resist. Yet, if one wanted to temporize, and if it would be prudent to temporize, doesn't this look like a plausible occasion for displaying delicacy?"

He twisted and turned irresolutely, weighing this consideration against that until after luncheon, by which time it had become distinct to him that he could do no less than ride over to Southacre and make kind inquiries. He might be admitted or he might not; that must be a question for the bereaved one's decision. So he borrowed his father's cob once more and set forth to confront destiny.

Now, as Barbara had issued no orders with regard to the admission of visitors, and as her household had been given to understand that newspaper reports were to be tested provisionally as false, the butler deemed it his duty to inform Mr. Glyn that Mrs. Vale was at home. Consequently, the young man was ushered, immediately after his arrival, into the presence of a lady whose dismay at the sight of him was unconcealed.

"What on earth," she exclaimed, in accents of mingled ire and reproach, "has brought *you* here?"

"Only your own request," he made mild reply. "You asked me to come, and here I am. Have I ever failed to comply with any request of yours?"

She broke out into a short, vexed laugh. "Oh, how absurd! Didn't it occur to you that I wrote in the afternoon? Did you imagine that I should have written if I had heard then of the horrors which were made common property when the evening papers came in?"

He answered stiffly and rather sullenly: "I presumed, as I need scarcely tell you, that your letter was posted before you saw the evening papers; I didn't, I must own, presume that the news which they contained would horrify you. The way in which you have spoken more than once led me to hope that—but never mind. If you think that my intrusion is unconventional or in bad taste, I will take myself off; nothing is more easily done."

She very nearly begged him to suit the action to the word. Upon second thoughts, however, she impatiently motioned to him to be seated, and said:

"No; since you have come, you may as well stay a few minutes. I must get through the time somehow, and why shouldn't I get through it by talking to you? Especially as I have some curiosity to know what you take me for."

It was a legitimate curiosity; but it could not be promptly assuaged, inasmuch as he was quite unable, upon the spur of the moment, to define her. In his bewilderment, and in the absence of adequate verbal equipment, he had recourse to demonstrations which brought him within measurable distance of having his ears boxed.

"Is it possible," Barbara cried, starting away from him, "that you can be so fatuous as to suspect me of having fallen in love with you?"

The ears which had escaped physical chastisement became almost as red as if it had overtaken them, and the hero of many facile conquests looked almost as small as he felt.

"After all that has passed between us," said he, with a somewhat ludicrous clutch at his lost dignity, "I might, perhaps, be pardoned if I were what you so amiably call fatuous. But please believe that I am not. I have never flattered myself that my love for you was returned. I have always suspected, and now I am sure—since you ask me what I take you for, there can be no harm in my telling you—that you are only a flirt."

"Then why are you here?" Barbara relentlessly inquired; "and what do you want?"

"I thought," he replied, "that I had told you already why I am here. I don't want anything, thanks."

He was not quite sincere. He wanted very much to know what use she contemplated making of her liberty, and he would have given a good deal to discover whether, perchance, he had a rival whose existence had hitherto been hidden from him. It is not pleasant to be snubbed; but it is even less pleasant to have been successfully bamboozled. Her next words amazed and enlightened him, if they afforded but little salve to wounded vanity.

"Then we are in the same boat," she remarked; "for I want nothing that you or any other living being can give me. My husband, I know, is dead, though I am pretending—I can't tell you why—to disbelieve the story of his having been killed; and my husband was the only man for whom I ever cared, or shall care, a pin."

That, Ernest thought, was so like a woman. Just

because the man was dead, and for no other conceivable reason, she must needs make that preposterous assertion, in the utterance of which she contrived, very likely, to deceive herself for the moment. But was it not exceeding the limits even of feminine audacity and self-deception that she should proclaim it to a lover whom she had upon one occasion permitted to embrace her, and to whom she had again and again protested that she was the most unhappy and the most disillusioned of wives? Although he did not say this, a faint, sceptical smile revealed his thoughts, to which she promptly responded:

"Oh, you needn't giggle; if I have been an idiot, you are another. It was idiotic of me, I daresay, to flatter myself that I could make Denis jealous by my flirtations, and still more idiotic to fancy that I might get an hour of personal consolation out of them; but my eyes, at any rate, are opened now, whereas you appear to remain as blind as you have been all along. Not that it matters—nothing matters at this time of day. Only I should like you to realize, if you can, that it doesn't make the slightest difference to me whether you are in love with me, or angry with me, or puzzled by me, or what you are. You simply don't count."

He was not so blind but that he could realize that; nor was he philosophical enough to make his bow to the lady without more ado. Mortification stung him into speaking unadvisedly and alluding to episodes which would have been better ignored: whereupon Barbara, being sore all over, retaliated sharply, and a somewhat heated dialogue ensued. In the midst of this a third person, who had entered the room unnoticed and had closed the door behind him without making a noise about it, advanced and would



doubtless have overheard much that directly concerned him, had he not deemed it incumbent upon him to reveal his presence by a cough.

He was not altogether happy, poor fellow, in his selection of a moment for dramatic reappearance; yet, if he wished to ascertain by ocular evidence—as possibly he did—how reappearance on his part would affect certain persons who had not treated him over and above well, there his information was for him. Ernest Glyn's heightened colour faded into the pallor of blank dismay, while Barbara, starting out of her chair with a shriek, stood dumfounded for an instant, then threw up her arms and made as though she would cast herself into those of the newcomer.

"Denis!" she cried. "O Denis! can it be yourself?"

Denis Vale fell back rather hastily. "How do you do, my dear Barbara?" said he. "How are you, Glyn? I must apologize for falling upon your heads like this out of a comparatively clear sky; but the fact is that I walked up from the station—I am always walking up from the station, am I not?—and I quite forgot to pull the door-bell. Yes; such as you see me, I am myself, not my ghost. Perhaps I ought also to apologize for not being my ghost. I can only assure you that, until I reached London early this morning, I had no suspicion of having been promoted to the honour of an obituary notice in the newspapers. I should, of course, have telegraphed; but one can't think of everything. I found your telegrams, which I missed at Aden and which were despatched in pursuit of me, at the club this morning; so I need not ask whether the children are all right. You yourself look completely restored to health, Barbara, I am glad to see."

He spoke slowly and quite composedly. No doubt he desired to give his startled auditors breathing space for the recovery of their own composure, and to some extent they did recover it. He was, naturally, begged to give explanations (perhaps they were both grateful to him for so pointedly demanding none on his own score), and these were supplied by him in the fewest possible words.

"That yarn about a massacre is all moonshine. As a matter of fact, there was a bit of a skirmish, but nobody was killed, and we had only three of our men slightly wounded. I wasn't there myself; I had left the other fellows and was making my way to the coast when I heard of it; so then I thought I had better turn back and find out what had happened. That of course delayed me a good deal, and then I had a series of unlucky adventures, including a shipwreck, with which I needn't trouble you. The upshot of it was that I was taken on board a small Italian steamer, the skipper of which refused to touch at Aden and finally deposited me at Suez, where I was laid up with an attack of fever and ague. There wouldn't have been any use in my reporting that to you, and when I was well enough to ask that any letters or telegrams addressed to me at Aden should be sent on, the answer was that they had already been forwarded to London. So then I took the first P. and O. boat and came home as quickly as I could. That's all. I am sorry I couldn't get back sooner; but the fault, as you see, was not mine."

Barbara began to laugh nervously. She perceived that Denis was above all things anxious to avoid a scene, and she herself recognised the advisability of deferring one; but so long as Ernest Glyn remained stupidly in the room further speech was almost

impossible. She frowned impatiently at the young man, who, for his part, asked nothing better than to beat an orderly retreat. By means of what mumbled congratulations and embarrassed remarks he covered this she did not heed; the essential point was that he did, after a minute or two, take his leave, Denis with much politeness escorting him to the door. Then she felt at liberty to give the run to her emotions, which were of a mixed order. Vaguely conscious that her husband was not best pleased, and that he had surprised her in company which he would hardly have chosen, she nevertheless took it for granted that what she was about to say would put that all right at once. The unfortunate part of being always self-engrossed is that it entails inability to enter into other people's mental condition, and is apt to presuppose a degree of comprehension on their side which would be nothing short of miraculous if it existed. Barbara, having made the discovery that the key to her whole conduct was to be found in the fact that she had never really ceased to love Denis, assumed that all she had to do was to fit the key into the lock; it did not so much as occur to her to doubt the success of a process so simple. Accordingly, when he returned, after showing the visitor out, she rushed impetuously to meet him, with hands outstretched.

"At last!" she exclaimed. "O Denis, if you only knew how miserable you have made me!"

A shower of cold water, which she received full in the face, took her breath away and checked the ardour of her advance.

"I can well believe," Denis frigidly returned, "that I have caused you considerable annoyance; misery is perhaps rather too strong a term to suit the case or the individual. What can I say? I have already

begged your pardon for bouncing in a second time, unannounced, and nobody can be more sensible than I am of my bad taste in being still alive. But don't be alarmed. I continue to accept what I made up my mind to accept a good many months ago; I do not propose to take any action that can expose you to inconvenience. It follows that you are in no way called upon to play a part for my benefit. To do you justice, you play it very fairly well, considering how short a time you have had for rehearsal; but these efforts are not required, you see, and—may I say without discourtesy that I would just a little rather not be kissed?"

"Oh, *don't* be so horrid!" pleaded Barbara, upon the brink of tears. "How can you say such things when you must know perfectly well that you are talking nonsense! I forgive you for having left me all this age without news of you, and for having allowed me to believe that you were dead; surely you might forgive me for receiving a goose whom I didn't a bit want to receive, and whom I don't want ever to see again."

"Oh, I forgive you," answered Denis tranquilly. "That is, I condone your behaviour; which is, to all intents and purposes, another way of saying the same thing. As for your not having wanted to receive him, it seems odd that, in that case, you should have sent for him, as he says you did; but the point is not one of much importance."

"Did he say that?" ejaculated Barbara, excusably incensed. "The beast!"

"Well, yes; I agree with you that it would have been more becoming on his part to hold his tongue; but I suppose he was frightened. He had no reason to be. I listened to the assurances which he seemed

to think were my due, and I didn't kick him down the steps for his impudence. Between ourselves, it really wouldn't have been worth while."

Barbara made one more assault upon the stone wall with which she was confronted. "No; it wouldn't have been worth while—indeed it wouldn't. He knows now, for he has just heard it from my own lips, that he is nothing, less than nothing, to me. He ought to have known that from the first. And, don't you think, Denis, you might have known from the first that you are, and always have been, everything to me?"

Denis laughed. "I wonder what in the world you are driving at. I wonder whether you forget that these eyes beheld you in the arms of a young man whom you now describe as a goose and a beast. I wonder how you would mentally describe me if I believed a solitary word of what you are saying. Perhaps what you really mean is that you are tired of Mr. Ernest Glyn; I can imagine its being possible to tire of him."

Barbara retreated to her chair, sank down upon it despairingly, and covered her face with her hands. "I have told you nothing but the truth," she moaned. "*Can't* you believe me?"

He answered with a queer note of compassion in his voice: "I am afraid not; I am afraid I can't accept assertions quite as easily as situations. Suppose we say that you have told me a part of the truth? What appears to be true is that you are in some fashion repentant. I don't pretend to know the precise meaning of that; but I do know that this talk about my being everything to you is neither convincing nor particularly pleasant to listen to. Shall we agree to drop it for the future?"

Barbara made no immediate reply; but presently she lowered her hands, revealing a tear-stained and haggard face. "Ah, you don't love me, Denis!" she murmured.

"My dear woman," he returned, smiling, "how profoundly you would despise me if I did!"

## CHAPTER XXIV

### ANGELA HAS A BUSY AFTERNOON

ERNEST GLYN rode away from Southacre with a strong sense upon him of having been well treated by the Fates. He had been quite disgustingly treated, he thought, by Mrs. Vale, whom he made heartily welcome to her resuscitated husband, and who, he hoped, would be pleased with that unexpectedly restored treasure, now that she had got it. There is no accounting for tastes, nor does any rational being attempt to account for feminine caprices.

"My conduct, at all events," reflected the dismissed diplomatist, "has been absolutely correct. I have done everything that honour and fidelity could possibly demand, and she has snubbed me for my pains; I have given Vale a chance of quarrelling with me, in case he wanted to quarrel, and he hasn't seen fit to avail himself of it. So now I'm free, and it's all right."

Why, if it was all right, did he deal a sudden, unprovoked blow at the quarters of the cob, who snorted indignantly and bucked? But why, for the matter of that, does a drop of bitterness lurk in every cup of earthly felicity? We miserable mortals must needs take what we can get and be thankful that we are no worse off.

Such was the philosophical conclusion of this young gentleman, who saw every reason to anticipate

that he was going to be pretty comfortably off, and who, earlier in the day, had recognised with precision the solid, practical points of superiority which Angela Rowe possessed over Barbara Vale. That he should head for Brayton Lodge forthwith seemed so natural a result of previous incidents that he did not think twice about the matter. "Let us get the confounded thing over and have done with it," said he to himself; so sure was he of his ability to accomplish this confounded thing without risk of renewed confusion.

Meanwhile, the lady to whom he was about to pay the highest compliment that a man can pay to a woman was far too much occupied with meditations of her own to recollect his existence. Angela, who had left Mount-Sorrel immediately after breakfast, and had thus missed the summons forwarded to her from Southacre, had been a little disappointed to hear of George Hallett's even more matutinal departure. His message of apology to their host had alleged an imperative engagement; but she did not greatly believe in that engagement, whereas she could form a shrewd guess at one of his reasons which had prompted his precipitate flight.

"He was afraid I should worry him and try to dissuade him," she thought. "He was quite mistaken; I know his obstinacy too well to waste time over any such vain efforts, and if he is bent upon getting himself killed to no purpose, killed he will be. He has gone up to London, no doubt, and most likely the next news we shall have of him will be that he has started for Africa. He might have said good-bye to an old friend; but I suppose he doesn't like saying good-bye. Men never do, although it hurts them so much less than it does us."



Something—it may have been, as she told herself that it was, the news of poor Denis Vale's death, or it may have been the prospect of losing one who was dearer to her than Denis Vale had ever been—was hurting her horribly. She pressed her hand upon the place where the dull pain was—the place familiar to us all, where the pain so often is—and wondered whether it would ever go away. Perhaps she did not deserve that it should; perhaps the bishop was right, and her inveterate abuse of the luxury of self-sacrifice had led her into victimizing the one person in the world for whose sake she might surely have faced a heavier penalty than that of personal happiness. But it was too late to make amends now; it would be selfish and cowardly to arrest him at this eleventh hour upon the plea that she loved him; besides which, she was resorting to extreme measures in order to save his life. "If this is true," she could hear him asking, "why did you not say so before?"

To her, thus mournfully chewing the cud of tardy remorse, entered a spick-and-span youth who advanced towards her with a countenance wreathed in smiles, and who had an irritating air of being convinced that she must be glad to see him. Sorry though she was to see Ernest Glyn (for the nature of his errand was legibly written all over his self-complacent person), she could have found it in her heart to embrace him when he blandly announced:

"I am the bearer of good tidings. You will be rejoiced, I am sure, to hear that Vale has turned up safe and sound in spite of the newspapers, and that I have just left him in the bosom of his family."

"You haven't!" she ejaculated.

"Oh, yes; there wasn't any massacre, and if there had been, he would have escaped, because he didn't

happen to be upon the spot when the fighting took place. He went back, on hearing that there had been a scrimmage; then I think he said that he was shipwrecked in the Red Sea; after that he was taken ill at Suez or Port Saïd or somewhere—I don't remember all the details of his Odyssey; but they were meant to account for his not having written and for his pouncing upon us like a hawk, without notice. Why does he always pounce, I wonder? It seems so thoughtless."

"Why are you always there to be pounced upon?"

"I am only there when I can't help it. I'll tell you how it came to pass that I was at Southacre to-day, and I hope you will acquit me of having disobeyed your orders. It was understood between us, if you remember, that I might find it out of my power to stand aloof."

But Angela, for the time being, was little interested in Ernest Glyn's peccadilloes, venial or otherwise. Not until she had asked a number of rapid questions and had received such information as could be extorted from a man who was thinking about something else did it strike her as unfortunate and ominous that Denis should for the second time have surprised his wife in company which had at least the appearance of being fraught with peril.

"How did they meet?" she anxiously inquired. "Did they seem to be moved? Were they affectionate? Did they kiss one another?"

"Nobody ever kisses anybody else in the presence of a third person nowadays—that is, not intentionally," answered Ernest, with a grin. "No; they were not exactly what you could call demonstrative, although I believe she would have been, if he had allowed her."

"Why wouldn't he allow her?"

"Can't say, I'm sure; perhaps he preferred to wait. But don't be alarmed; it's all right by this time. I stayed a few minutes—just in case, you know, he might have some observation to make about my being in the house, but he was perfectly civil; he evidently doesn't intend to be troublesome. Indeed, there is no reason why he should; for, if you will believe me, at the moment when he walked in Mrs. Vale was protesting how she had never wavered in her allegiance to him."

"I have no difficulty in believing that," replied Angela, "though I can understand your scepticism."

"You would understand it even better," observed the young man, unable to conceal a transient touch of chagrin, "if you had seen a note which she posted to me before the false news of Vale's death came. Really, after what she said in it, I could hardly help calling at the door, and how could I help going in when I was told she was at home?"

"I am sure you have a full right to boast that you did nothing you could help. Well, and then you were told the painful truth, I suppose?"

"Whether it was the truth or not I am scarcely prepared to swear; it certainly wasn't painful. One gets into messes, quite innocently as a rule, and then one is so placed that—that, in short, one can't be downright brutal. But one is only too thankful to be released."

"So I should imagine."

"At any rate, you can imagine how thankful I must be that that chapter is finally closed; for *you* know, if other people don't, that Mrs. Vale is nothing in the world to me." He added, with a swift, vicious pang of memory, "She simply doesn't count."

"Doesn't she?" returned Angela, laughing. "And I know that, do I?"

"Yes; because I have had no secrets from you since we first became—friends. It is no secret to you—it *can't* be—that I am devoted, heart and soul, to a woman with whom Mrs. Vale is not for one instant to be compared; a woman whom it would fulfil my wildest dream of happiness to call my wife."

"Meaning me?" Angela blandly inquired.

He was rather disconcerted. Nobody knew better than he how to make love, provided that his sentiments or his passions were stirred; but he was not much of an adept at dissimulation, and, although he did his best, he was conscious that the apostrophe which he now addressed to Mrs. Rowe, with whom he had been unable to fall in love, rang somewhat false. It was prettily worded; only it had a little too much the effect of having been learnt by heart, as in truth it had been. All the skill in the world, however, would have been thrown away, and when he had quite finished she briefly responded:

"I am sorry I can't pretend to take you seriously, though I am glad to know that you are not serious."

He vowed that he had never been more so in his life.

"Well," she rejoined calmly, "perhaps that doesn't imply anything very grave. If we don't understand one another one of us must be abnormally dull, and I don't think I am that one. I have wit enough, anyhow, to see that there are reasons which might reconcile you to marrying me, although you don't cherish a romantic affection for me; but can you, looking at it impartially, discern the faintest shadow of a reason for my marrying you? Can you for one moment suppose that I have lost my heart to you?"

Twice in one afternoon. This kind of thing was not only at variance with all precedent but almost beyond all bearing. Ernest, with tears of mortification in his eyes, called Heaven to witness that he had done nothing to deserve such treatment. Did Mrs. Rowe, who had assured him of her friendship, and to whom he had made a clean breast of his history, accuse him of proposing to her while he was enamoured of somebody else? Or did she, more unjustly and cruelly still, take him for a vulgar fortune-hunter?

She answered, without a sign of compassion or contrition, "I acquit you of being vulgar, but my modesty allows me no illusions. Confess at once that if I were as poor as I am homely, the honour of bearing your name would never have been offered to me. I don't bear you the slightest ill-will; I even feel indebted to you in more ways than one; but I must respectfully and finally decline the honour. Is there anything more to be said?"

For practical purposes there was nothing more to be said; yet she had to listen, with such patience as she could command, to a good deal of futile declamation.

The young man did not accept his defeat gracefully. He made remarks respecting the encouragement that had been given him which were the more objectionable because there was, after all, some justification for them; he was very persistent, very reproachful, and it took her a good quarter of an hour to get rid of him. But at last he went, and then, drawing a long breath of relief, she ordered the carriage. Late as it was, she had made up her mind to drive over to Southacre, in case, as seemed only too probable, her services should be needed there. The circumstances under

which Barbara and her husband had become reunited had, by Ernest's account, been the reverse of satisfactory, and fresh troubles might, in the absence of a peacemaker, be imminent. So to Southacre she went as fast as her horses could trot, doubting not that if anybody was competent to arrange terms of peace between two persons who desired to be reconciled, she was. It may have been premature on her part to assume that Denis was weary of strife; but she knew that Barbara was, and indeed that chastened little lady avowed as much without even waiting to be interrogated.

"You have come," said she, after the inevitable preliminary interchange of embraces, congratulations, and condolences, "to beg us to be good. Well, I have been good and I mean to continue being good; but it hasn't been any use, and I am afraid it isn't going to be any use. The only result of my flinging myself down in the dust before Denis and licking his boots was that he laughed at me. Just what I deserved, you will say. I can't contradict you; I deserve to be laughed to scorn, especially as my unfailing bad luck ordained that he should find Ernest Glyn, of all people in the world, closeted with me and making a bid for the place which was not vacant. It is rather poor fun to be rewarded according to one's deserts, though."

"It is so impossible for any human being to tell what another human being's deserts are," Angela sagely remarked. "Even if we knew, we shouldn't, as a general rule, wish to inflict them upon our fellow-sinners, and it is just as well that we can't know. The one essential thing, so far as husband and wife are concerned, is that they should love one another."

"Oh, of course that would make it all plain sailing.

And the one absolutely certain thing is that Denis does not love me."

"Did he tell you that?"

"Yes, I think so; I don't remember exactly what he said. Anyhow, it seemed to strike him as quite funny that I should pretend to have always cared for him when he himself had seen me kissed by another man. I suppose it does sound rather funny; although it is so perfectly true."

"It doesn't sound altogether like the truth, one must admit. Are you prepared to be very humble and very penitent? Because I am afraid you will have to be."

"My dear Angela, I am prepared to be anything you like. I am a crushed worm, without a turn left in me. I see all the absurdity of being in love with one's husband, and all the painful humiliations to which one is exposed by being so absurd; but—there it is. I loved him even when he enraged me most, and when I thought he was dead, I simply worshipped him. Unfortunately, he knows, upon the best authority, that he is adored by me, and it is a matter of complete indifference to him whether he is adored or not. He affects to be incredulous; but what he really means is that he neither understands nor wants to understand. He is not the sort of man who could ever be made to understand complications and contradictions."

"It is open to question," observed Angela, "whether that sort of man exists; but may I at least try my hand at convincing him that you are not the sort of woman he imagines you to be?"

"Oh, by all means. I have parted with my last shred of pride. You will find him in the nursery, where the children, no doubt, are giving him a bois-

terous welcome, upon which it was delicately hinted to me that I had better not intrude. He won't mind *your* intrusion; he will be charmed to see you. I daresay he will wish with all his heart that you, instead of I, were the mother of his children. Oh, Angela, don't you think—I am down, and anybody can trample upon me, and your opinion of me has always been a low one—but *don't* you think I have been rather roughly dealt with?"

Perhaps not so very roughly, all things considered; yet her actual plight was melancholy and humiliating enough to appeal to a soft heart. Angela did not add to its abasement by telling her with what celerity her rejected Ernest had applied for another situation, but said a few consoling words and then went upstairs in search of Denis, whom she anticipated pacifying with no very great difficulty.

She did not know Denis Vale quite as well as she knew Barbara—although she was more intimately acquainted with the former than with the latter—otherwise she might have felt less confident. She found him, as had been predicted, in the nursery, and he likewise fulfilled prediction by being charmed to see her; but he instantly divined her errand, which he was careful to give her no opportunity of discharging. With Dicky on one knee, Di on the other, and Miss Beamish hovering ecstatically in the background, he occupied an inexpugnable position, from which the broadest hints failed to dislodge him. His strength was to sit still, and he sat still, good-humouredly answering questions, relating his adventures, and ignoring dumb entreaties, until Angela was compelled to say outright:

"Now I want to have you all to myself for a few minutes before I go, please. Will you turn these



young people out, or will you come down to the library with me? Because I must insist upon your doing the one or the other."

Denis sighed and deposited his offspring upon their feet.

"Miss Beamish," said he, "will you kindly remove the family for a few minutes? As Mrs. Rowe insists upon a few minutes, she must have them; but a few will suffice. I happen to know what she is going to say, and she might just as well leave it unsaid."

"You don't know what I am going to say," Angela began, as soon as the children, with some outspoken protests on their part, had been induced to obey orders.

"Oh, yes, I do, if you will excuse me for contradicting you. You want to represent that Barbara is really very sorry, and that there may, after all, have been faults on both sides, and that this is such an excellent occasion for passing a sponge over the past and making a fresh start. I agree with you and I differ from you. Barbara's penitence is worth whatever it may be worth; I shouldn't wonder if she had been genuinely distressed by the news of my death and genuinely glad to see me alive and kicking. But even if her penitence were worth nothing at all, and if the sight of me in the flesh had dismayed her, it would be all right. I accepted long ago the exigencies of the situation, which remains practically unaltered. I also remain, and propose to remain, unaltered; eloquence, if you will believe me, will be thrown away upon my obstinacy."

"I did not think of employing any," Angela returned; "I only wished to lose no time in informing you that Mr. Asher claims to have seen your wife in the arms of Ernest Glyn on a certain afternoon last summer."

"Oh, he does, does he?" said Denis grimly. "Then it will be my duty to make him eat that statement as publicly as he has made it. Has he made it publicly?"

"Not yet; but he has told Mrs. Asher, who at once named her price. The Ashers are to be asked to dine at Mount-Sorrel or all is to be revealed. As a matter of fact, they have been asked, and although your supposed death would have cancelled the invitation, I presume it will hold good now that you have reappeared."

"Good Lord," exclaimed Denis impatiently, "what a stupid thing to have done! Hadn't any of you common sense enough to perceive what would come of yielding to a threat? I must take this in hand to-morrow morning." He added, looking Angela straight in the eyes: "Of course the man's assertion is false. On the afternoon to which he alludes I was walking a good many yards in front of him, and it is therefore quite impossible for him to have seen anything that I didn't see."

"I am glad," observed Angela quietly, "that you take up that line; I quite hoped that you would. Only, in your absence, we could not call you as a witness, and you must allow that you lent some colour to his story by absenting yourself."

"Certainly not," Denis declared; "I allow nothing of the sort. I didn't absent myself for ever so long, and it doesn't follow that a man has quarrelled with his wife because he wants to have a shot at a lion."

"Not necessarily; and if there is no quarrel—why, indeed, should there be one, seeing that Mr. Asher's tale is a malicious invention? But perhaps you will admit, between ourselves, that there is a

coolness. If you, on your side, will make that admission, I will tell you something in return."

Denis laughed. "Oh, I frankly admit the coolness; and now what gratifying assurance are you going to give me, by way of reward. Something that may be implicitly relied upon, no doubt. We are nothing if not frank and truthful persons, you and I; aren't we? We make no false statements."

He looked at her with a twinkle in his eye which she understood, and to which she responded:

"What false statements have *I* made, please? At any rate, the one which I am going to make is absolutely veracious, and you will be very silly if you disbelieve it. Barbara is just as fond of you to-day as she was on the day when you married her, and perhaps a little more so. I don't care what she may have said or looked like; but I know she hasn't done anything unpardonable, and the only question is whether you are as fond of her now as you were then."

"If that is the only question," returned Denis, still smiling, "it is easily answered. I have no hesitation in owning, between you and me, that I am *not* quite as fond of her now as I was then. Nevertheless, there will be no quarrel, no scandal, and very little, if any, trouble with our friend Mr. Asher. I trust that will do, because it will have to do. Now, if you will allow me, I will tell the children that they are at liberty to return to their own territory."

## CHAPTER XXV

### SOME METHODS OF BRINGING CONVICTION HOME

MRS. ROWE slipped softly out of the house without renewing, as she had hoped and intended to do, her comforting representations to its mistress. There was in truth nothing of a comforting nature to be imparted to Barbara, and she greatly feared that she had failed in the mission which she had so presumptuously taken it upon herself to discharge. For displeasure, scepticism, and reluctance on Denis's part she had been prepared, but not for indifference. If he was really indifferent—and he had well-nigh convinced her that he was—neither she nor any other interloper could prevail with him, and all that remained to be hoped for was the discovery of some tolerable *modus vivendi* between the husband and wife. At this they must arrive, and doubtless would arrive, unassisted; the most honest and earnest of their well-wishers had but a poor chance of helping them towards it. So she drove away with a rather heavy heart, notwithstanding her joy at the safety of an old friend, to which may have been added some exultation over the thought that another old friend was no longer called upon to scour dangerous regions in quest of him.

Denis, however, was far from being as indifferent as he affected to be. Himself of an incurably, and perhaps tiresomely, faithful temperament (has it not

been said that nothing fatigues like constancy?), it was as much beyond his power to change as it was to pardon other people for being changeable; and his wife, despite all the excellent reasons that he had for doubting and disdaining her alleged repentance, continued to be the only woman in the world whom it was possible for him to love. Therefore, after Angela had left him, he did, during a brief space of time, wonder whether reconciliation was out of the question. *A tout pache misericorde.* Barbara in all probability wanted to make friends, had had a sharp lesson, and would behave better for the future. Moreover, women, when all is said, must not be judged by quite so rigid a standard as men, their notions of what is justifiable or the reverse being always so strangely out of the perpendicular. But he hardened his heart. A good deal may be accounted for and excused upon the hypothesis of feminine perversity; but when you have actually seen your wife kiss, or allow herself to be kissed by, another man, you cannot, short of being a congenital idiot, cherish further illusions upon the subject of her affection for yourself. "No, my dear Barbara. Friendship, if you like, and mutual toleration, whether you like it or not; but nothing more, thank you."

He went down to dinner in that inflexible frame of mind, which Barbara made no further effort to modify. The significance of Angela's silent flight had not been lost upon her, nor did she see any use in renewing overtures which had already been rejected with so much contemptuous urbanity. Denis was essentially unjust; but, of course, like so many unjust men, he plumed himself upon being a mirror of justice, and, in any case, he did not care a bit for her. Their quarrel, after all, had arisen out of that circumstance,

and might as well end with it. Therefore she also set her teeth, hardened her heart, and tried, with some degree of success, to look acquiescent.

Dinner, under such circumstances and under the eyes of curious and excited domestics, was what it could be; that is to say, an extremely trying ordeal, endured creditably enough. If it was obvious that something was amiss, it likewise remained undeniable that the restored master of the household and its mistress were upon terms of much mutual civility. They surprised themselves and one another by the facility with which they were able to discuss African adventures and the vicissitudes of African travel. Barbara listened with kindly interest to a list of trophies, in the shape of heads and skins, which were destined ultimately to adorn the hall; while Denis manifested all the concern which it was proper for him to feel on being informed of the details of her recent illness. Dessert, accompanied by the tumultuous entrance of the children, proved, however, a rather more difficult job to manage. Intentionally or innocently (one must retain a more vivid recollection of one's own childhood than is vouchsafed to most of us in order to determine this point) they said dreadful things and asked impossible questions, those children. Prompted, it may be, by Miss Beamish, or perhaps by Heaven, or possibly, as their father inwardly conjectured, by the deuce, they persisted in aggravating the situation until it became too much for Barbara's nerves. She ended by dismissing them hastily, and, as soon as they were out of the room, dropped her elbows upon the table, covering her face with her hands. Denis lighted a cigarette and waited patiently. He did not have to wait long.

"This can't go on," she groaned; "I thought I

could bear it, and I was making up my mind to bear it; but I can't. Really and truly, I can't; and, indeed, I am not so sure that I would, even if I could. It hurts too much."

She was sobbing like a baby, and he could not help being a little touched, though he exhibited no symptom of surrender. "What alternative have you to suggest?" he inquired.

"Oh, I haven't any; I am too stupid, too miserable, too bewildered to think of any. You must devise some arrangement which will enable me to spend most of my time away from home. It will be easy enough for you to make suggestions, because you don't care."

Denis shook his head. "Unconcerned though I may be, I am afraid it is beyond me to hit upon any permanent plan of life for you and me which will not involve our being a good deal under the same roof. We need not be much in one another's way; but we must—and I am sure that, after a time, you will agree with me as to this—steer clear of open scandal."

She threw up her hands despairingly. "Ah, you don't understand. It is because you don't care that you can't understand. And as for scandal, it is bound to come, do what we may; for Mr. Asher saw me that—that hateful afternoon last summer, and he has told his wife, and she is going to tell everybody else."

"You may make your mind quite easy about the Ashers," returned Denis calmly. "I have just heard from Angela Rowe that they threaten ridiculous things, and I propose to ride over to Beaulieu the first thing to-morrow morning for the purpose of convincing them how perfectly ridiculous such

threats are. I daresay I may take a hunting-crop with me, though the odds are that it will not be required."

A fugitive memory of Ernest Glyn's scared countenance when Mr. Asher had been mentioned to him in connection with a horsewhip flashed across Barbara's mental vision and drew a choking, unwilling laugh from her through her tears. "Oh, well," she sighed, "I suppose *you* are not afraid of the man. Why should you be?"

"There is no reason, I assure you, why *you* should be. And now, Barbara, won't you try to be sensible? I will if you will. Live together we must, for the children's sake, not to mention your own; let us live together as good friends. I take your word for it that you will have nothing more to do with young Glyn, and I promise, on my side, that I will make no further allusions to by-gones. Don't you think that might suffice?"

She made a vehement gesture of dissent. "Never! I would much rather be hated than tolerated. You sound generous, and in a way, I suppose, you *are* generous; but I can't live upon generosity. If you loved me only a little bit; if you cared for me a hundredth part as much as I care for you, you wouldn't talk about our being good friends."

She broke out into a storm of weeping which shook her from head to foot, and which, in spite of himself, shook Denis a little also. Her emotion, at all events, was genuine, whatever might be the worth of her sentiments. He dropped his cigarette, walked round the table, and laid his hand upon her shoulder, not unkindly.

"My dear child," he said, "I can't bear you to distress yourself like this. I quite believe that you



are fond of me; I quite believe that you are sorry for—for having behaved rather foolishly——”

“Oh, but what is the use of that?” she interrupted, in a choked voice. “Don’t you believe that I love you?”

And, as silence was his only reply, she raised herself, with a sudden impulse, and flung her arms round his neck.

“Oh, Denis, my own dear, you *do* believe it—you *must*! I am not asking you to say that you love me. I know you don’t; but I won’t let you doubt that I love you. Is it because of my having allowed that wretched, silly boy to kiss me? But should I ever have done it if I hadn’t loved you all the time?”

He did not laugh. If at first he did not speak, it was because there was an unexpected lump in his own throat, and because his own eyelids were moist. When he regained control over his voice, all he said was: “I believe you, my dear. Perhaps if I hadn’t loved you all the time I shouldn’t have been so hard upon you.”

Thus peace was concluded between two persons who scarcely understood one another, and who may have been incapable of so doing. That they were well suited nobody who knew them could imagine; yet, since their affection had survived some rude shocks, they had perhaps as fair a prospect of happiness as can be looked for by the majority of married couples in this haphazard world. One of them, at all events, fully intended and expected to be happy, while the other began to entertain certain modest hopes. Certain troubles, certain storms he likewise foresaw, his common sense being of so inexorable a quality; but among these he did not reckon (although she did)

any probable action on the part of a discomfited M. F. H.

On the following morning he carried out his intention of riding over to Beaulieu, where he was at once received, hunting-crop and all, by Mr. Asher, who, shaking him warmly by the hand, cried, with every appearance of sincerity:

"I'm awfully glad to see you, Vale. Never was more glad to see anybody in my life."

"I am much obliged to you for saying so, Mr. Asher," Denis gravely replied. "But I wonder why you should be so glad as all that."

The other laughed. "Well, you were dead, and are alive again, you know. At least, you were reported to be dead, and I can assure you I jumped for joy when I heard, an hour or two ago, that the report was false."

Denis observed that his abrupt advent had no doubt been of a nature to make his acquaintances jump, but that he really could not venture to ascribe such motions to sheer joy at the fact of his being still in existence. Perhaps Mr. Asher would kindly explain?

Mr. Asher, thus exhorted, laughed once more. "Oh, if you won't allow a man to take the liberty of being glad for your own sake that you survive, I can give you another and a more selfish reason. The fact is that my wife—you know what women are!—has been moving heaven and earth for months past to get an invitation to dinner from Lady Mount-Sorrel. It came to this at last that unless she had obtained what she had set her heart upon, she would have hooked it out of the neighbourhood, and upon my word I don't know that I shouldn't have had to follow her, selling this place, chucking the hounds,

and all. Well, by good luck and in the nick of time, she got her precious invitation. I leave you to imagine what her feelings were when another card followed upon its heels to announce that, owing to severe domestic bereavement, the dinner was off."

"I see. And now, perhaps, she thinks it will come on again, with fatted calf as an appropriate centre dish?"

"I suppose it will come on again, won't it?" Mr. Asher asked, with a touch of anxiety.

"That I can't say; Lady Mount-Sorrel has never done me the honour of consulting me about her guests, and it seems unlikely that she ever will. But it was just with regard to that invitation that I wished to have a word or two with you. It was procured, I am sorry to find, by means of assertions which I must request you to contradict immediately."

Mr. Asher's complexion, always sallow, assumed a somewhat yellower tinge. His guilty conscience may have made a coward of him in one sense; but he was not prone to physical timidity, nor was he disposed to be bullied. Moreover, the assertion which he was invited to retract had been a true assertion.

"Look here, Vale," said he, "this thing needn't go any further; it sha'n't go any further. Of course, when I told my wife what I told her, I did a rather dirty thing."

"You certainly did."

"Well, I admit that, and I was sorry afterward; the Bishop of Blackhampton will tell you that I was sorry, if you care to ask him. I was pretty strongly tempted, that's all. However, as I say, it shall go no further. Only you mustn't expect me to call myself a liar."

"What I expect you to do," returned Denis, "is

to acknowledge that you have made a very serious mistake and that your eyes deceived you. They must have deceived you, since you profess to have witnessed a scene which I was much better placed at the moment for witnessing than you were, and which——”

“And which you say that you didn’t witness?” inquired Mr. Asher with a queer look.

“I shouldn’t advise you to declare that I did—I shouldn’t, really. I am afraid that, in the event of your adopting that course, the county would be made too hot to hold you, whether Mrs. Asher decided to leave it or not. By the way, is Mrs. Asher at home?”

“Yes,” answered the other rather sullenly, after a pause, “I believe she is. What then?”

“Then would not the best plan be to beg her to come in here for a minute and get the thing over? You will have an unpleasant quarter of an hour, I daresay; but what is that in comparison with the unpleasantnesses which you would bring upon yourself by sticking to an untenable position?”

The quarter of an hour which ensued did in truth prove unpleasant both for poor Mrs. Asher and for Denis; for Mrs. Asher, when sufficiently incensed, was a lady who did not mince her language. Nevertheless, an animated colloquy ended in the only way that it could end. Basely deserted by her husband, and confronted by a powerful personage who might be disbelieved, but who would assuredly be backed up by his neighbours, the irate Isabella was fain at last to recognise the necessity of capitulating.

“But I need scarcely tell you, Mr. Vale,” she wound up by saying, “that putting me to silence is by no means the same thing as convincing me.”

Denis shrugged his shoulders. “Well, my dear madam, so long as you are put to silence we may

dispense with conviction." For indeed she had been very rude to him.

"And let me add that I think the very least you can do is to see that we do not suffer for our forbearance."

"It strikes me, Mrs. Asher, that you might have been made to suffer if you hadn't forbore from calumny; I don't know in what way you are likely to suffer now."

"You must know perfectly well that Lady Mount-Sorrel may seize upon this opportunity to leave us in the lurch. If you will allow her to do that you will be——"

"Worthy of all the compliments which you have been lavishing upon me? Unfortunately, as I was telling your husband before you joined us, I can't in the least answer for Lady Mount-Sorrel. However, my own opinion is that she ought to ask the master of the hounds to dinner, and I will tell her so, if you like."

"I certainly think that you ought to tell her so and that she ought to do it. Her not renewing the invitation which has already been sent would be such a marked slight that even Reuben, I presume, would scarcely care to go on hunting this country after it. As for me, I don't like Trentshire, and its inhabitants have always seemed to me to be an extraordinarily dull lot. Pray don't imagine that I am anxious to stay here; I only stipulate, as I have stipulated from the first, that if we do stay, we are to be properly treated."

Denis rode away, laughing under his breath every now and again. The Ashers, he was bound to admit, had not been quite properly treated by him; but then they, on their side, had behaved somewhat improperly. And, after all, there was every probability that

they would get what they wanted. He was in a frame of mind to think that perhaps everybody ought, if possible, to get what he or she wanted, and that may have been one reason why he turned his horse's head towards Five Oaks, instead of trotting straight home to relieve Barbara's anxiety.

He found George Hallett leaning over the entrance gate in conversation with the Bishop of Blackhampton, and the greeting accorded to him was one of which he had no cause to complain. Nevertheless, when the warmth of this had exhausted itself, George had some natural remonstrances to make.

"Well, you're a nice, considerate sort of chap," he began. "I suppose it never occurred to you that a telegram can be sent from any quarter of the globe at a comparatively trifling outlay. Do you know that you have put me to no end of expense and inconvenience by shamming dead, and that if you had turned up forty-eight hours later I should have set forth already, with a gang of other desperadoes, to rescue or avenge you?"

"It is a sad disappointment," observed the bishop demurely; "but, as I have been endeavouring to persuade our friend here, there is a possible silver lining to the cloud."

"You haven't persuaded me," said George.

"Very well; I must leave the task to more competent hands. Now my time is nearly up, and I want to have Denis to myself for a matter of ten minutes, since he can't escape me. Would you mind strolling across to the stables until I have done with him?"

The bishop had ready a little homily upon marital duties, which, however, was not delivered, inasmuch as there was, happily, no need for it. Denis made

him glad by telling him in a few words that bygones were to be regarded as bygones, and that the discretion of the Ashers was now assured.

"As for that," the bishop remarked, "I believe it was assured in any event. The unfortunate man came to me in a state of genuine remorse over what he had done, and he promised that, if matters came to extremes, he would refuse to corroborate his wife's story. There are worse people in the world than Mr. Asher, you may depend upon it."

"H'm! Maybe so," Denis tolerantly agreed. "It's a pity he can't help being such a cad; but I wish him no evil. May he get his dinner at Mount-Sorrel and be happy! I say, fancy old George having organized a search party to proceed to East Africa! It's awfully good of him, and it makes me feel horribly ashamed of myself."

"Be as much ashamed of yourself as you please, my dear boy; that won't do you any harm. But the goodness of George seems open to criticism. Between you and me, I am not sure that determination to recover possession of you, alive or dead, had quite as much to do with his rather crazy plan as despair at his supposed inability to gain possession of somebody nearer home."

"Ah! just so. To tell you the truth, I came here on purpose to have a talk with him upon that very subject."

"Then you can finish for me what I was saying when your arrival interrupted us. There isn't really very much to be said by either of us; but I will just give you a hint or two, which you may pass on to him, lest he should be senseless enough to refuse another chance to a lady who, unluckily, has not always known her own mind."

When Denis joined his friend in the stables he had so little doubt as to the success of the latter's suit that he slapped him on the back and gave him joy in advance.

"What an old duffer you have been!" he exclaimed. "I grant you that she also has conducted herself rather idiotically; still, you might have shown a little more vigour and resolution. It's going to be all right now, though."

"That's all *you* know about it," said George.

"I know what I heard from the bishop, and he speaks with some authority, considering that he heard it from her own lips."

"Heard what? You don't mean to say——"

"Of course I don't. Do you suppose she told him in so many words that she was dying to marry a man who was bent upon flying the country in order to get away from her? But it comes to the same in the end. Now, instead of offering you hints, as the bishop suggested that I should, I'll give you a piece of practical advice. Be off to Brayton Lodge as fast as you can ride, and if you get No for an answer—but you won't—don't take it. Because it won't be meant."

"My dear fellow," protested George, "what's all the hurry? I have a hundred and fifty questions to ask you about your own affairs."

"You shall ask them and welcome, this afternoon, when you come to announce to us that you and Angela Rowe are engaged to be married. Meanwhile, I don't mind your mentioning to Angela from me that she was more or less right yesterday, and that I was more or less wrong. Now off you go, and good luck go with you! There's only one thing that I regret."



"What is that?" the somewhat bewildered George inquired.

"Only that you and she didn't come to your senses and an understanding some months ago. Then the question of the mastership would have settled itself, and we shouldn't have had to make the best of Mr. Asher, as I am afraid we must now. But one can't expect to get everything all at once."

## CHAPTER XXVI

### LADY MOUNT-SORREL SUMS UP

It had occurred to Angela Rowe as not altogether impossible that a visitor might call upon her that afternoon, and although she did not acknowledge it to herself that she was staying at home in the hope of his appearing, she did so far depart from her habit as to decide on remaining indoors for several consecutive hours after luncheon. The necessity of grappling with neglected correspondence served her well enough for a pretext. The nature of her feelings may, therefore, be divined when a visitor was indeed announced and when that visitor proved to be Lady Helen Glyn.

"My dear," cried that most unwelcome intruder, stepping forward with outstretched hands and swimming eyes, "I had to come myself; I really couldn't help it. I daresay I am a bore, I daresay you are disgusted to see me; but here I am, all the same."

There she undoubtedly was, and upon an errand which there was, unhappily, no need for her to specify. All that could be done was to beg her to sit down and ask, with as good a show of kindly and ingenuous concern as could be assumed, whether anything was the matter.

"O Angela," she reproachfully returned, "as if you did not know what is the matter! When I tell you

that poor Ernest insists upon leaving us to-morrow morning, and that he talks of going straight back to that pestilential climate, too, you will forgive me, I am sure, for making a last appeal to you which he is too proud to make himself. Can you really wish to have his death at your door?"

"No," answered Angela, "I don't; but I feel no great fear of his dying, and I doubt whether he will go any farther than London on his way to South America at present. However, I had better say at once that, even if his life depended upon it, I couldn't marry him, and that I never dreamed of marrying him."

"That," whimpered Lady Helen, with a tragic wave of her pocket-handkerchief, "I cannot believe. No, I simply *cannot*. Whatever you may be, Angela, you are not a mere flirt; you would never have led him on and trifled with him as you have done for the sake of amusing yourself by breaking his heart. Some motive you *must* have had, and I think I am fairly entitled to ask what it was."

She was, of course, not entitled to ask anything; nor, in all probability, was she so dense as to be unable to form a pretty shrewd conjecture as to the motive in question; but Angela, conscious of having led the deluded Ernest on and trifled with him, felt very uncomfortable.

"Dear Lady Helen," she pleaded, "do I look like the sort of woman for whom a man of your son's age could possibly break his heart? I may have acted inconsiderately, I may have disappointed you——"

"Oh, but so dreadfully!" interpolated the other.

"Yes; but nobody's heart has suffered, and—and, after all, he is so nice-looking that he is sure before

long to be accepted by some other heiress far better suited to him in point of years and tastes."

Lady Helen, unmoved by this incidental compliment to her son's personal appearance, made a mournful, dissentient gesture. "There are no heiresses in South America, and the North American ones won't look at a commoner nowadays. And as for suitability, what could have been more suitable? A person like yourself, of whom we are all so fond, and in our own neighbourhood, and everything!—it would have realized the dream of my life. Oh, Angela dear, won't you—can't you—reconsider it?"

This touching apostrophe was followed by a short interval of silence, after which Lady Helen resumed: "I do trust that you know Ernest better than to believe any of the nonsense that has been talked about him and Mrs. Vale. There was, of course, at one time a sort of flirtation, for which she was entirely to blame; but that is quite an old story, and now that Mr. Vale has come back, alive and well——"

"Your son," remarked Angela, "was the first to communicate that good news to me. He called it good news, and I daresay he was sincere. But his subsequent remarks were not sincere, and if he was surprised, as well as rejected, he had no business to be surprised. I may owe you some apology; I don't owe him any, and I can't think that I left him the vestige of an illusion. Surely you must have come on your own initiative, not as an envoy from him."

Lady Helen owned that she had, and that Ernest had finally abandoned all hope; but her own hopes and illusions were, it seemed, of a tougher fibre. Much time and patience had to be expended upon her before at length she rose, and, with a profound sigh, ejaculated:

"Well, all I can say is that after this I shall never believe in anybody again."

Her pathetic adoption of a future line of conduct, which has, at one time or another, commended itself to the majority of the human race, was overheard by George Hallett, who entered the room just as she was preparing to leave it.

"Small blame to her," was his comment when Lady Helen had rustled forth, pressing her damp handkerchief to her lips and acknowledging his greeting only by a smothered snort which might or might not have been intended to be significant.

"You too!" murmured Angela sorrowfully; although the sight of him was anything but a sorrowful one to her.

"Why not I as much as Lady Helen Glyn? I am a simple, straightforward mortal—I used to think that you were another—and this atmosphere of general deception is beginning to shake my nature to its foundations. What does it all mean? What on earth are you all trying to do? If Vale is safe and sound, if he and his wife are the best of friends, if Asher don't mean any harm, and young Glyn has never done any, why, in the name of wonder——"

"Oh, it hasn't been so simple all along," interrupted Angela, laughing; "it has been rather complicated at moments, as you know. And you also know, because I told you, that I was obliged to suit my behaviour to circumstances. But is it true that Denis and Barbara are friends?"

"So he gave me to understand a while ago. He didn't descend to particulars, and perhaps they don't signify very much. Now, may I inquire whether it is true, as Lady Helen's red eyes make me hope it

is, that Master Ernest has been dismissed with a flea in his ear?"

"You need hardly ask, need you? If I have been obliged to deceive a few foolish people, at least I have never deceived you."

"I am sorry to hear that," said George, with a rather glum face.

"Sorry that I have always tried to tell you the truth?"

"Yes, because I would so joyfully and gratefully think, if I could, that you had deceived me in one particular. But I can't think any such thing, and Vale is an ass, and so is the bishop, and so, God knows, am I. I ought to be bolting towards Somaliland—I wish to goodness I was; but one can't start before one is ready, worse luck!—instead of intruding upon you here with my wearisome entreaties, to which there must always be the same answer."

"Did Denis and the bishop tell you to come here?" Angela asked.

"Oh, yes. They think it would make things so nice and comfortable all round if you were able to give me a different answer that they couldn't, I suppose, help imagining that you would. They didn't affect my dull imagination to that extent, though; for I know you better than they do. You say you have always told me the truth, and indeed I believe you have."

"You won't," protested Angela, looking down, "allow me to speak."

"Yes, I will; only I know very well what you are going to say."

"You don't seem to remember very well what I said just now. I said I had always tried to tell you the truth, and so I have. How could I tell you what

I never suspected myself until quite a short time ago?"

George opened his eyes wide. "Tell me now! Tell me quickly!" he gasped, in somewhat hoarse accents.

There are things which admit of being told quickly, yet upon the telling of which it is not unpleasant to linger. He heard all that it was essential for him to hear before he was a minute older; but the light had begun to fade ere two people who were engrossed in topics devoid of interest to the rest of the world recollected that the rest of their small world had claims upon them.

"I believe I promised to look the Vales up this afternoon," George said. "Don't you want to look them up too? How about your driving me over there?"

This seemed to be as good a way as another of making known what must needs be made known, and Angela, though a little shy, acquiesced. Perhaps she would not have done so had she foreseen how greatly her shyness was destined to be augmented by the sight of Lady Mount-Sorrel's carriage waiting outside the door at Southacre.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed, on recognising that imposing equipage, "we are going to fall into the midst of a *conseil de famille*. For Heaven's sake don't breathe a word about—about *us*!"

"Oh, why not?" returned George, who did not himself suffer from false shame; "they'll all be delighted. Besides, I sha'n't be able to help it. Even if I were to hold my tongue they would guess at once by the look of me how things are."

As a matter of fact they did guess; or, at all events, Denis, after one glance at his friend's radiant coun-

tenance, guessed, and Barbara was not slow to follow suit. Barbara, who wore a subdued, chastened aspect, and who had obviously been crying, behaved rather better than might have been expected of her. She expressed no astonishment and asked no questions, but embraced Angela, whispered a few affectionate words, and then, turning to her grandmother, who was drinking tea in the depths of an arm-chair, said:

"Now we can talk about something more pleasant. Here at least you have a thoroughly meritorious couple, and you can wish them joy without feeling it right to tell them how very little they deserve it."

"What! Angela and Mr. Hallett?" exclaimed Lady Mount-Sorrel. "Dear me, how very odd of them, after all these years! Still, better late than never, perhaps. I'm sure I congratulate you both most sincerely; though I must say I wish it had been the bishop."

At this everybody laughed, which seemed to annoy the old lady.

"Oh, there is nothing to laugh at," said she; "it might have been the bishop, and for some reasons I am inclined to think that it ought to have been. However, these matters are ordered for us, and, what with Angela's leaning towards ritualism and her horses and all, I daresay there would have been drawbacks. I shall have to find somebody else for him, I suppose."

"Let us hope, for the poor man's sake," murmured Lord Mount-Sorrel, "that that step on your part has not been ordered. As for me, I am a fatalist, though I didn't know you were, mother; and I venture very humbly to mention that I have seen for a long time past what the fate of our dear friend Mrs. Rowe was bound to be."

"Don't be flippant," retorted his mother, with some



asperity, "and pray don't make yourself ridiculous by pretending to have detected what, I honestly own, escaped me. As if you ever saw anything except the celestial bodies! And you wouldn't see *them* any longer, remember, but for the merciful interposition of Providence."

Then she gave her tea-cup to George Hallett and stretched out her withered little hands to Angela.

"Hoist me up," said she, "and take me somewhere out of earshot; I must talk to you." When her request had been complied with, she remarked, in accents of reminiscent self-complacency: "I have been talking to the others; it was an imperative duty to do so. I only trust that they will lay my words to heart and profit by them."

"Poor Barbara!" said Angela, smiling. "I hope you haven't scolded her too severely."

"My dear, you must know as well as I do that it would have been quite impossible to do that. It is true that she has escaped the consequences of her criminal folly owing to her husband's—what shall I call it?"

"Perhaps," suggested Angela, "we had better not call it anything."

Lady Mount-Sorrel glanced quickly at her and gave an abrupt laugh. "Perhaps," she agreed, "we had better not. I have been talking to him, too; he needed it. Well, as I was saying, Barbara has escaped; but really this sort of thing must not occur again."

"I don't think it will," said Angela.

"May you be right. Well, now I come to you and your ways of going on, which I cannot but consider to have been most reckless, most uncalled-for. If you had only been content to leave things alone,

you see, there would have been no trouble at all. Let it be a lesson to you for the future."

"What sort of a lesson, dear Lady Mount-Sorrel?"

"Why, a lesson to leave things alone; or, at any rate, to leave them to me. Nice advice you gave me the other day! Not that I acted upon it, to be sure."

"You asked Mr. and Mrs. Asher to dinner," Angela could not help observing.

"I sent the invitation for reasons which I believe I gave you at the time. Subsequently I was enabled by circumstances to withdraw that invitation; but I haven't a doubt that if I were to consult you now—which I shall not—you would recommend me to renew it."

"Really I should," Angela confessed.

"Doesn't that show what an unsafe counsellor you are? People who, in addition to being underbred and intrusive, have brought an infamous accusation against my grand-daughter which, as I now understand, they have been compelled to withdraw unreservedly! And you actually wish me to take them under my wing, as though I could imagine them fit associates for my neighbours!"

"I don't think that the Ashers are so very unfit to associate with our neighbours," pleaded Angela, "and I do think that the case is rather one for a general amnesty."

"So do I," said Lord Mount-Sorrel, who had drawn near. "Come now, mother, don't you think we ought to give a dinner in honour of Denis's safe return to the bosom of his family and—and of other satisfactory events?"

"With all my heart," answered her ladyship.

"And we will include Mr. and Mrs. Asher among our guests, eh?"

"Most certainly not. You either do not realize or else you forget that the credit of the county must be upheld, and that in these revolutionary days a very grave obligation rests upon those who are still able, however unworthily and inadequately, to maintain some remnant of old traditions. As a master of hounds Mr. Asher may be the right man in the right place: personally, I should not have thought that he was; but I have no pretension to be a judge. Assuredly, however, he is fitted neither by birth nor by conduct for the company of those who, so far as this poor, passing world is concerned, must be pronounced his betters, and his wife, from all that I hear, is even more objectionable than he. Oh, no! I should fail altogether in acting up to my conception of my duty if I were to assume any sort of responsibility for such persons."

Lady Mount-Sorrel spoke in mild but firm and clear accents, which, as her hearers were well aware, gave warning to all and sundry of an inflexible determination. Nevertheless they surrounded her in a body and did what in them lay to soften her hard heart. They met with no sort of success; she remained deaf alike to argument, entreaty, and advice.

"My dear people," she exclaimed at length, "one would almost think, to hear you, that you were afraid of these Ashers. Of course, if you were, that would be a very bad reason indeed for urging me to receive them; but why should you be? What possible injury can they do to any of us? It is true that my son is master in his own house, and that he can extend hospitality to whom he pleases; but I am compelled to say that if Mr. and Mrs. Asher are invited to dine under his roof, no alternative will be left to me but to quit it."

Lord Mount-Sorrel shrugged his shoulders. "At

that rate," he remarked, "we must throw up the sponge, I suppose. But it's shockingly cynical of us."

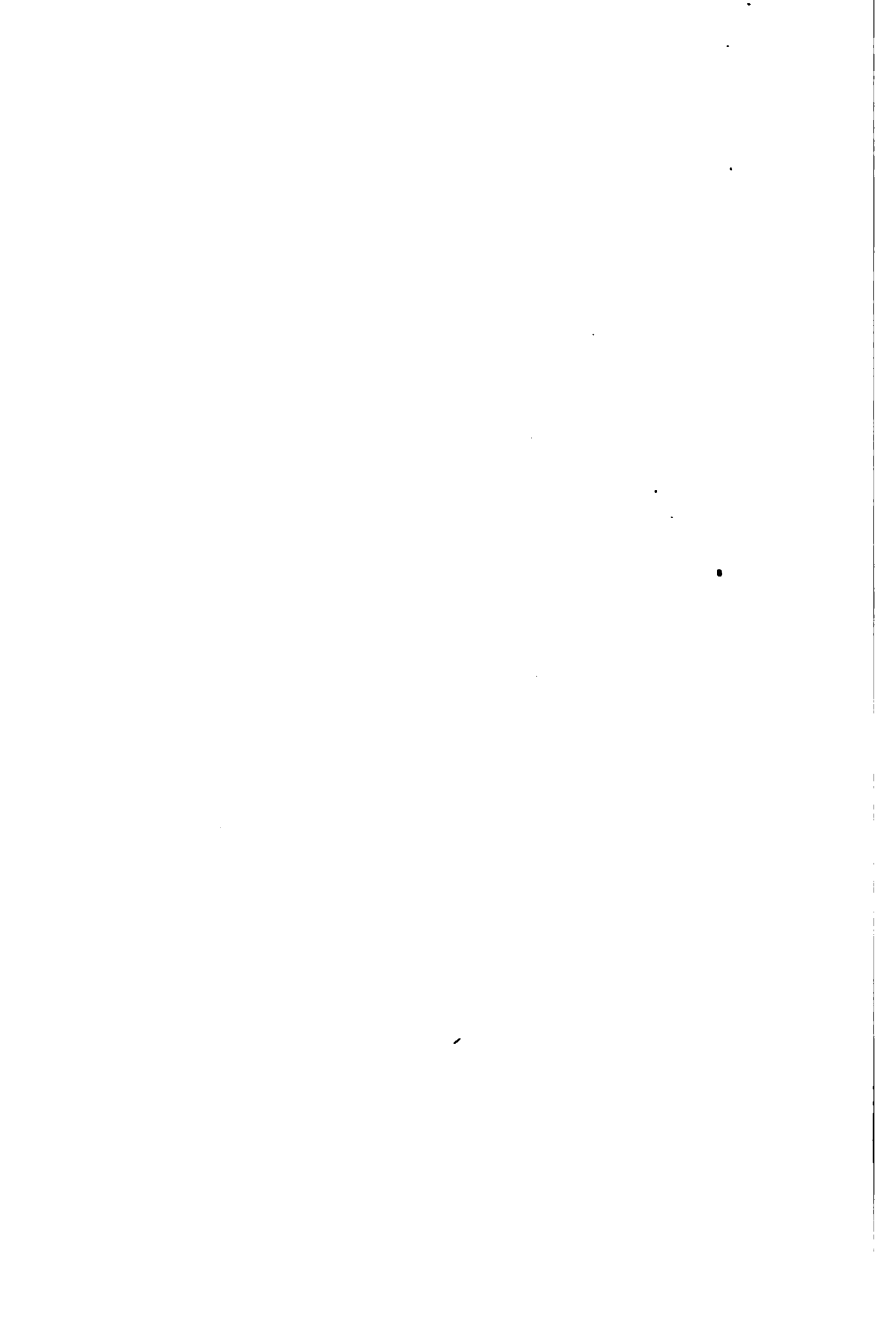
"My dear Mount-Sorrel," returned his mother, raising a pair of innocently wondering eyes to his face, "I am quite at a loss to understand your meaning."

A close observer might perhaps have discovered just a twinkle of malice in those same old eyes when she added: "You will all of you live to thank me for having resisted you in this matter."

And the worst of it is that they did. The prophecy recorded above was uttered rather more than a twelve-month ago and Beaulieu now awaits a tenant or purchaser. In a more fashionable and possibly more congenial hunting district Mr. Asher has found stabling for his long string of horses, while the control of the North Trent Hounds has been assumed, in compliance with universal request, by Mr. Hallett of Brayton Lodge. There is no denying that this state of things is entirely agreeable to the chief personages dealt with in the foregoing narration, nor need too much importance be attached to a remark by the Bishop of Blackhampton, who is reported to have declared that if there were such a thing as poetical justice, they would sooner or later be made to smart for having robbed the diocese of an opulent supporter. The diocese, supported by Mrs. Hallett, Lady Helen Glyn, and others, is not doing too badly, and it is doubtful whether poetical justice exists anywhere outside the domain of poetic fancy.

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THE END



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